

The Wendy that Stayed

By Andrea M. Bell

E. COLLINS ROUSSEAU 2007

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Again to Neverland...

“Please, take your fairy and go back on your adventures.”

Before Wendy and Michael and John, Peter might have shrugged and flown off home to fun and adventures. But since prams had changed their names and mothers and babysitters had taken over for governesses, there were no more Lost Boys to play with, or else they went somewhere else. And Peter, though young, still knew what loneliness was. So this time, he did not fly away so easily. Instead, he came up with a plan.

“Come with me then,” Peter said, hopping up into the air and flying in lazy circles, grazing the air just above her head. If Mary had no parents, then there would be no one to keep the window open for her, and if no one did that, if no one remembered that she was gone missing... she would never leave Neverland. Just like he hadn’t. And if she was a girl, she couldn’t help it. Even a girl was better than having nothing but faeries to play with.

This Book Is Dedicated...

To dreamers who never listen,
To children who never want to grow up, and
To readers.

With *great* thanks to John-Lewis and Sandra, without whom the
bandit captain may have been named something silly.

To mom, for humoring me. To dad, for supporting me.

For E-M, S-M, E-J, N, and LB.

And to Seth, for weathering fairy dust
and coming with me.

Contents

Prologue	7
One: The Wendy That Stayed	10
Two: Enter the New Neverland	21
Three: Princess Tiger Lily	27
Four: Proper Swordfighting	40
Five: New Lost Boys	58
Six: The Song of Forgotten Forgots	70
Seven: The Ruined Holiday	79
Eight: A Jealous Declaration	89
Nine: Avid's War	100
Ten: Peace Offering	108
Eleven: The Dragon	113
Twelve: The Knight and the Dragon	120

Thirteen: An Almost Gallant Rescue	125
Fourteen: Battle of the Brothers	133
Fifteen: The Storm and the Cave	147
Epilogue	154

Prologue

Remember, if you can, where you go when you dream. Imagine, if you cannot. Try for a pleasant dream, and not a nightmare. Nightmare places and dream places are paternal twins, but opposites. Seeing the face of one, we often call it the other. If you can truly recall where you are when you dream, you are a most fortunate person. Or maybe it is because grown-ups learn to forget the stuff of dreams and how to enjoy them... But whatever the reason, most people forget about the dream place they visited when they wake up. Dream places are easily discarded by the waking mind. It causes us no pain at all, but is ever so discourteous to the dream place. Humans, as any non-human thing will tell you, are ingrates, and easily confused. Nightmare places we remember, because the shapes of the darkness haunt the space behind our eyelids. Nightmares are much more memorable in their fearsomeness than dream places. So what we

remember as a place of dreams is often the aftertaste of fear hidden behind blinking eyes.

Neverland is a dream place. For the most part, Neverland is a happy dream. It is filled with adventures and with the laughter of a hundred thousands of children. When Neverland was very young, it had trouble keeping shape. A discarded dream place is difficult to keep stable, and many are forgotten before they have the chance to ripen into true sleepy splendor. Fortunately, for Neverland, and for you who reads this, there was a boy who chose it as his home. That boy was Peter Pan.

Before Peter, Neverland lost its shape often, growing small or large, and at times shifting from wild to tame, without any real reason behind it; the whim of the dreamers of the evening, perhaps. After Peter came to the dreamland we now call Neverland, it became an island infested with enough adventure to enthrall any child. There was more to Neverland after Peter arrived than there ever was before. And, as Peter has always had quite an imagination, to enthrall such an active child requires the island's constant attention.

Over the years, as the waking world changed, the dream places began to grow more wild and varied, stretching and contorting outrageously so much that any individuality was lost in suiting the demanding dreamers that happened to visit. So the island, Neverland, needed Peter more and more to keep its shape, and so made itself ever so much more exciting to entice him to stay. Peter, the boy raised chiefly by himself and cared for chiefly by faeries, found more adventures than it is possible to mention in any volume of writing, and left Neverland less and less, until finally he stopped leaving the island in the stars altogether. Neverland's plan worked. So Peter missed watching what happened when the waking world grew up some. What use had

Peter for the waking world when all the excitement he could ever require was just below the window of his tree house?

What Neverland in all its might and magic could not do was to conjure up a proper companion for Peter. Do not mistake me, the dream island tried. Despite the waking world's bad intentions and disbelief, there were always faeries and mermaids and any number of fantastical creatures for Peter to stumble upon or clash with. But a creature is not the same as a person. By and by, as Lost Boys grew up and out grew Peter and his adventuring, and pirates began to lack a sufficient thrill for the boy who had been adopted by the dream island, Peter grew bored.

There was no one to share stories with. No one to crow his successes to, or to barely escape with. Peter might never admit what he really felt, but he did feel something missing. It had been some time since he had last gone to collect his latest in a long line of Wendy's from the ancestral Darling house in waking London.

And so we begin our story when Peter finally left Neverland again.

One: The Wendy That Stayed

Once upon a time, long after the Lost Boys Wendy knew left Neverland to become the Darlings' children, and much later than when Hook was swallowed by the Ticking Crock, and years past when Wendy grew up and got married and had Jane, Peter came back. Again.

Whether Peter stayed a real boy and grew up is a matter, of course, to ask Peter. But if he would not become a real boy for Wendy, what could Jane or the other Darling girls who followed after her do that the original could not?

Seeing the wide world by night made it so that Peter missed a lot of changes as the years passed. He had taken brief visits to the world in the time since Wendy left, but it was not until he returned to find Wendy's house locked up tight and empty that he

took a *real* look around. Neverland was a fantastic world, everything he could ever imagine, but what greeted his curious, wild eyes that evening was more spectacular than even he could ever dream of.

Normally the world was a blur of lights beneath him as he played tag with the winds. But as he flew much slower above the city, he saw that the streets were lit as brightly as though it were daytime, with flashing colors and signs and picture books on walls that moved. Pirates seemed to walk the streets, and princesses, and grown-ups all seemed dressed like Lost Boys. He could not believe his eyes.

But what seemed strangest to Peter was his inspection of homes. The children inside were all awake, despite the hour, laughing and playing. The homes were shaped differently, now, boxes stacked on boxes with no yards and no pets. And the adults, no longer bound by their tight, severe clothing, were laughing and smiling as well.

Surely now, thought Peter, no children would dread growing up. What use was Neverland in a time like this? What adventures were to be had on the ocean and in the junglewood that could not be had in the populated wilderness below him?

He circled the high rooftops of the city pondering his questions when Tinkerbelle, his newest fairy, buzzed around his head, chattering loudly and going on about something. The minute they had arrived, she had zipped off, as if called by something. Peter wondered what had brought her back and put her in such an agitated mood.

Each and every fairy has their own child, and Peter had been born such a long time ago that his own fairy, his own Tinker Bell, had long since perished. Since then, he had been borrowing

other children's fairies and renaming them to suit. Since no children seemed to come to Neverland much anymore, no one even really noticed they weren't getting the attention they ought to be from their fairy. So, like many other fairies before her, this Tinkerbelle's name was not originally Tinkerbelle, but Peter had dubbed her with that name when he chose her to be his fairy. Her real name was Silver Bell, and she was *much* less brazen than the original.

A fairy's obligation to its own child is quite binding, for the short life that the fairy enjoys, which lasts nearly as long as any child manages to remain a child. The fairy's job is to keep the child company and to cheer up the child when things are looking rather grim. It is why a child will smile for no reason when punished, and will laugh when there is nothing whatsoever funny with the world. Peter had simply been a child too long, and done it too well for Tinker Bell to remain his fairy. She was forever saving him from poison and from sneak attacks he didn't bother minding.

The duties of a fairy seem small to an adult, and even to Peter, who rarely noticed that there were periods of time when his fairy would disappear to help another child through something particularly trying. The situation worked out for the precise reason that the fairy leaving to attend their real child rarely bothered Peter. He never noticed, just as he never recognized the difference between his new fairies and his old ones after he had renamed them. Since most of Peter's fairies were female, it was always terribly troubling to them, but in the end they were happy to be Peter's near-constant companions, and it all worked out for the best.

Mary happened to be the current Tinkerbelle's real child. And this Tinkerbelle was the two hundredth one Peter had appropriated over the years.

When Peter did not move immediately, Tinkerbelle jerked him by the ear to where she intended he go. Despite their size, a fairy can be quite strong, when they are very interested in something, as Tink was in the situation she was trying to get Peter to notice. Eventually, interested enough to see what Tink was going on about, Peter followed on his own. He also preferred not to have her trying to tug his ear from his head, and knew that it was easier to go along than to try and fight a fairy.

The glowing fairy led him to a great big, giant house on the edge of the city. The outside, to Peter's careful eyes, was dark, and seemed to be folded in black though it was faced in pristine white paint and brick that was sure to sparkle in the daylight. The house was pulled back from the lanes, and the lighting on the edges of them did not touch the walls of the house through the gardening done around front. There were two candles flickering in the windows, and Peter paused.

"What's this, Tink?" he asked. "Surely, someone died here. That's all." Death was nothing new to Peter. His adventures often involved killing pirates and bandits and animals of all sorts, so nothing could be new or special about this to him.

Buzzing around him, Tinkerbelle tugged on his ear again and flew towards the open upstairs window. Tall white curtains still hung, and billowed into the room. Peter watched Tinkerbelle zip through the curtains before he heard it.

Crying.

Specifically, it sounded like a *girl* was crying, so Peter cautiously followed Tinkerbelle into the window. His ears had played tricks on him before, once or twice, but on the other side of the window he found a girl, dressed in black, as the house

seemed to be, kneeling beside a bed and crying into the covers. It was so like a girl, Peter thought, to start crying.

The room was dark, but the walls were painted baby blue, with fluffy white clouds and bright green jungle images. There was a large bookshelf filled with books, and there were toys arranged neatly into a toy box. It was a nice room, Peter thought, and then he turned his attention back to the crier.

“Girl,” he asked, stepping over to peer down at her, “why are you crying?”

The girl turned quickly, startled to find anyone at all in her room, and when she saw Peter, she made to scream. All the servants and everyone in the house was downstairs, everyone in the house was dressed in black and speaking in murmurs quietly. Darting forward, Peter covered her mouth with a hand and slowly drew his dagger, pointing it at her eye.

“None of that,” Peter said in his best commanding voice.

She nodded, slowly, and Peter lowered his hand experimentally.

“Who are you?” the girl asked when she finally found her voice.

“Peter Pan, at your service,” he replied, stepping back and bending at the waist as men had used to. The girl started laughing. “And you are?” he asked with narrowed eyes.

“Mary Elizabeth Wells,” she replied, still giggling.

“Why are you laughing, Mary?” Peter asked, feeling offended.

“No one bows like that anymore,” she said, her red-rimmed eyes amused. “And Peter Pan is nothing more than a story book.”

At that, Tinkerbelle zipped forward, tugging at Mary’s hair. Insulting Peter had easily turned her one emotion from empathy to anger. Mary tugged on her dark locks, eventually yanking them free of the fairy’s grip.

“What’s that?” she asked, smoothing the curls that Tinkerbelle had bothered.

“Tinkerbelle, my fairy.”

“Everyone knows-” Peter’s hand clapped over her mouth and his dagger once again sprang to his hand with a growl before Mary could even blink. Fairies were dying quicker these days, and he had been lucky to find himself a new one, so he shouted angrily, more angrily than he might have before, “Never say that!” he growled, leaning very close to Mary’s face indeed. “Whenever someone says that a fairy dies!”

Mary was again seized with laughter, having read the storybook tale, and Peter released her mouth without putting away his dagger. “This is absolutely unreal!” she exclaimed. “This is almost the same conversation the book said you had with Wendy! That is... if you can really be you.”

Tinkerbelle huffed, perching on the bedpost, still angry but unwilling to be thrown to the side by Mary’s yanking hands. She was glad that Mary had forgotten to cry, but disliked her teasing Peter. She was torn, a dangerous situation for a fairy, so she settled her one emotion on detachment and arranged her own shimmering hair.

"I *am* me," Peter said in a huff, heading towards the window. Girls always doubted, he thought sourly, and were never very much fun anyway. In truth he did not really believe that thought, but it *was* his thought at the time.

"Where are you going, Peter?" Mary asked.

"Back to Neverland," he said in the same sour-stubborn voice of his thoughts.

"Where you belong, I suppose," Mary replied, turning again to her contemplation of her dark room, just barely making out the hushed voices downstairs. Her smile fell and she leaned again against the bed, holding her tears for after Peter's inevitable departure.

Peter paused at the window, curtains already parted to fly away, and turned to look at Mary's fallen shoulders. For a moment she had seemed so very alive, and almost quite nice. "Why are you sad?" he asked, remembering his earlier reason for coming inside.

"Oh," Mary said with a shrug of her shoulders, affecting a nonchalance she did not feel and fighting to hold her tears in, "my parents died." Then she failed to hold in her tears, and started crying again.

Peter flew over and landed up on the bed with a grin. "Well I haven't got any parents," he said proudly, "and I'm not sad."

"It's different for you, Peter," Mary said, wiping at her tears angrily. "You don't remember your parents."

“Who wants to?” Peter asked, bouncing up and down on the mattress. To an adult, it might have seemed that Peter was denying a little too hard, but to Mary, it just seemed that he did not care at all.

“I find it very hard to forget,” Mary said in a prim tone. “So please, take your fairy and go back on your adventures.”

Before Wendy and Michael and John, Peter might have shrugged and flown off home to fun and adventures. But since prams had changed their names and mothers and babysitters had taken over for governesses, there were no more Lost Boys to play with, or else they went somewhere else. And Peter, though young, still knew what loneliness was. So this time, he did not fly away so easily. Instead, he came up with a plan.

“Come with me then,” Peter said, hopping up into the air and flying in lazy circles, grazing the air just above her head.

Peter’s thoughts went something like this. If Mary had no parents, then there would be no one to keep the window open for her, and if no one did that, if no one remembered that she was gone missing... she would never leave Neverland. Just like him. And if she was a girl, she certainly couldn’t help that. Even a girl was better than having nothing but faeries to play with.

“With you? Why?”

Peter shrugged easily, concealing his wicked little plan, but persisted in his convincing, “Come away to Neverland and forget what makes you cry.”

Mary, by all accounts a generally well thought out girl, was a little shocked by the invitation. She had never thought more of Peter and Neverland than stories, wonderful old stories, but still

just that. Fiction. From time to time she had considered Wendy and wondered what she would have done. So the offer was most intriguing... but...

“What if I can’t think of a happy thought?” she asked.

“That’s what fairy dust is for,” Peter said, balancing precariously on the end of the bed, his dirty feet leaving marks on the clean wood. “And I will stay until you do.”

“It may take a long time,” Mary replied, glancing down at her thick black dress. Peter’s invitation was a welcome one... to go away... Everyone looked at her so pathetically, now. Everyone. All the adults who had come in a frenzy of thick perfume and cologne, the men in their suits and the ladies in their finery, expected some reaction from her, something she did not feel quite old enough to understand...

Peter made a face. “I **won’t** grow up! Not for you or for anyone. Tricking me won’t work.”

“Tricking you?” Mary asked, climbing unsteadily to her feet. She narrowed her eyes at Peter. “Why would I want to trick you?”

Tinkerbell jingled her opinion, and Peter laughed, nodding. Mary frowned, not understanding fairy talk, and feeling very left out. “Puppies,” she said resolutely, folding her arms on her chest and not looking very happy at all.

Peter caught Tinkerbell and sprinkled fairy dust on Mary. She did not fly, or even levitate. Her stockinged feet stayed planted as firmly to the floor of her room as gravity could keep them. “You should think harder,” he said with a frown. “What about pirates? And swordfights? And-”

“Dragons,” Mary said finally, cutting him off with a sparkle in her eyes.

“Dragons?” Peter asked, looking at Tink. The fairy shrugged.

Mary lifted off the ground where she stood, her black dress fanning out around her. “Yes, dragons. Fire breathers with large wings and wide, bright eyes. Purple. And black. The ones who make smoke and clouds come out of their noses.” She clapped her hands happily.

The very idea of dragons making clouds turned Peter’s mind for a loop, so he shook his head to clear his thoughts and was pleased afterwards to find Mary floating. He smiled broadly and put his hands on his hips in triumph as she began doing circles around the room, cautious and with a growing smile on her face.

“It’s getting late,” Peter said, glancing distrustfully at the light through the tall white curtains. The streets were bright outside, even from a distance, but he did not think it was daylight. He had come in when the sky was dark, chasing the night around the world, and hadn’t seen the sun nearby when Tinkerbell pulled him deeper into the city.

“Or early,” Mary replied. Glancing down at the dark room and her black dress, she lowered slowly towards the floor.

Seeing her lowering towards the floor, Peter was gripped with a sense of sadness he had left behind long ago when he flew away the final time from his parents’ home to Neverland for good. He could not explain it, and being Peter, he did not try. He

grabbed her hand before she could touch down, "Then away to Neverland with us!"

Mary looked confused for a moment, but again began to fly as Peter's hand clasped hers firmly, a laugh bubbling up from inside her. As he lead her out the window, Mary's heart lifted and she laughed, her smile fixing on her face determinedly, and then said, "I've always wanted to know-"

"Second star to the ri-," Peter began automatically.

"Yes, yes," Mary said, remembering the book again. "But second to the right of what, exactly?"

Peter gave her a charming smile, the one that melted more hearts than can be mentioned here, and Mary's smile became less determined and more natural. "To anything you want," he said mischievously. "Now hold on and don't let go!"

Two: Enter the new Neverland

For those of you who may not be entirely familiar with the idea of Peter's admittedly spotty memory, let us give the children time to chase the winds across the oceans and through the clouds while I explain it to you. Imagine them, if you will, laughing and racing with dolphins and birds, and Mary's face lit up with the first rays of sunrise before Peter takes her hand and leads her on the starlit journey towards Neverland.

To understand Peter's memory you must consider your own for a moment. Consider what stands out most to you. For those of you who are very lucky and have seen Neverland, even fleetingly, in your dreams, what you will remember are happy times and smiling faces. Or, if you have had a particularly bad life, as Mary might have gone on to have with no parents and no real family left in the world, you may remember more the shadows

and mysterious faces. Having spent so much time in a place like Neverland, which by all accounts was as accommodating to Peter as his own imagination could be, almost all of his memories were happy ones. And as a thing that is always the same will eventually get boring, he began to not remember so much of it, choosing instead to continue living it.

What he *did* remember was always half truth and the other half imagining. For instance, to ask him about Captain Hook would reveal an entirely different story than the one we have already been presented with, making the entire thing confusing because the only one who really knows what happened to Captain James Hook is the dreaded pirate himself, and only the ticking croc can really say where he is now.

But let us return to the children.

When they got to Neverland, Mary fell almost at once in love with Peter's world of imagination. The moment the three of them broke through the clouds over the sea surrounding the island, the sun began to rise over the snowy mountain peaks, as it always did when Peter returned. Mary was glad to be in Neverland because it looked like a dream come true. She was also glad for the sun that broke through the clouds. Mary had found the flight to Neverland, through the star-laden constellations of creativity, to be quite cold.

It was harder and harder for anyone to get to Neverland at all, which was why there had recently been no new Lost Boys, and why the pirates seemed to be trailing out of residence and showing up in other stories. But despite minor difficulties in arriving, Mary was glad to see the land spreading before her. Her brown eyes opened wide and a smile as beautiful as a rainbow spread across her face.

Her smile was so infectious that not only Peter, but the skeptical Tinkerbelle joined her in it, and the three of them swooped down through the clouds to play with the waves, and Peter and Mary then flew racing each other into the thick of the junglewood, leaves and branches all around. Below them passed the Indian tribe, and what fairies hovered about that early in the morning tangled in the wake of their flight.

“What about the pirates?” Mary asked, swooping almost instantly up through the canopy to the sunny sky above, carried by her excitement and sheer joy at the feeling of flying.

Peter hurried to follow her, Tink zipping behind him. As he spoke, he pointed to the areas he was speaking about. “The croc developed a taste for pirates, they don’t make much noise anymore on the mainland. And bandits moved into the caves along the left side of the lagoon, and now they have battles on the sand with the pirates, waving swords and firing pistols.”

“Is it *very* bloody?” Mary asked, turning a little green.

“The bloodiest pirates died a while ago,” Peter said matter-of-factly, sounding a little disappointed. “They die well, but we’re due for some new evil pirates.”

“It sounds like you’re going to run out of the ones you’ve got,” Mary said. She giggled and flew in lazy circles around the puffy white clouds. “And like they’re grocery store produce.” And then she yawned rather loudly.

“Are you tired?” Peter asked.

“We did leave rather late,” she replied apologetically.

“You can sleep if you like. I’ll take you to the tree house where its safe, and when you wake up we will go on an adventure.” Peter’s eyes glowed and his smile turned mischievous.

“Provided I can have some proper clothes. You can’t expect me to go adventuring in a dress like this,” she pulled a face and then yawned. “Lead the way, Peter.”

Bowing at the waist again graciously, Peter offered his hand to Mary. As she took it, a great bolt of lightning ripped the sunny sky in half. The bright white clouds turned gray and then darkened to a burnt out black. From all around there was the noise of wings. The sound came from everywhere as soon as the children heard the first reverberation of it, bouncing from the trees and echoing back up to the clouds. Giant, flapping wings made leathery noises with their powerful strokes from somewhere unseen overhead.

Peter pushed Mary behind him defensively and drew his knife. Tinkerbelle flitted over to rest on Mary’s shoulder, hiding in her hair. “What do you suppose that is?” Mary asked.

Before Peter could answer, the clouds swirled tightly together, only to be burst through by a giant dragon with black scales and red eyes. Its giant wings were a dark purple. Peter drew his dagger and turned towards the dragon, ready to fly off after it, but Mary put a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t you know anything about dragons, Peter?”

“I know I’m not afraid!” Peter shouted, puffing out his chest and starting to fly towards the great beast.

“...Peter,” Mary yawned again, uncontrollably, holding him back. “It breathes fire. You’ll be roasted alive.”

Peter yanked his shoulder free. "Then go! Sleep in the tree house! I'll get roasted alive and-"

"But Peter," Mary interrupted again, "I don't know where the tree house *is*."

Peter glanced over at his shoulder at her and laughed. "Of course you don't," he said. "No one does but me and Tink. Tink, take Mary to the tree house while I-"

Behind Peter, even the giant dragon seemed to yawn. It circled the island once and landed on the far side of the mountains, which started to look distinctly like a castle. The huge, black-scaled body curled around rocks that started to look like parapets and towers, and for a moment all of Neverland seemed to be holding its breath and watching.

Peter shrugged, taking Mary's hand, and flew towards the junglewood again, leading the way back to the tree house. Once inside, Mary promptly curled up on Peter's bed and fell into a sound sleep. Tinkerbell again looked her over, considering her earlier emotion, and shrugged, deciding she had done the right thing.

Watching Mary sleep for a long moment, Peter glanced at Tinkerbell and asked, "Why?"

It was a difficult thing for Tinkerbell to answer. Like emotions, the memories fairies have are very fickle, more fickle than Peter's spotty memory to say the least. It was hard for her to say to Peter that Mary had seemed to her a lot like Peter himself, or to explain to Peter that she was not really *his* Tinkerbell. So instead, she combed out her hair to the length of Mary's dark curls and batted her lashes with a smile.

Peter laughed. "Come on," he said with a yawn of his own, "tell me."

But Tinkerbelle gave him no response, and the bed looked very comfortable, and so he crawled onto it and lay down beside Mary. Once his eyes slipped closed, Tinkerbelle covered them both with a blanket and flitted outside to watch the moon rise early.

There were fewer faeries in Neverland, she thought, and no more Lost Boys. The pirates were being replaced by bandits, and now a dragon... What had happened to Neverland? What would happen now?

The two of them had flown far and wide across the world, inspecting windows and peeking for the light of children's happy dreams before searching for Wendy's house. But everywhere, the light that spoke of Neverland was absent or very, very dim. In its place, there was only darkness. Tinkerbelle did not have thoughts long enough or a heart big enough to fear what sort of dreams children had if there was only darkness under their pillows and beneath their beds. If the world stopped believing in magic and fairies... what place would be left for Peter? He would not stop believing, she knew, but was one little boy's belief enough to keep Neverland alive?

She settled on a branch of the great Two-P-Tree, the oldest and largest of the great Nevertrees, watched the twinkling blanket of stars overhead as night slipped up and wrapped its arms around the island, and sung softly a song that the first child who had been to Neverland while waking had ever sung, a song to the things you lost when you gained it.

Three: Princess Tiger Lily

The problem with girls, Peter always found, was that they easily forgot how to fly. And if they were young enough not to forget *that*, then they were too young for adventures, and always, always started crying and wanted their mothers. Since Peter's only real mother was a memory he had long forgotten, he did not have much sympathy for their tears.

He had long ago decided not to remember sad things, and his mother and father were sad to him because he had never seen how they cried when they lost him. All Peter had ever seen was that they had replaced him.

But Mary was not like other girls. Her parents had died, and somewhere deep inside she understood there was no one for her to run home to, and no reason for her to forget how to fly.

Once she was rested, Mary rose from sleep, but found she could not remember much of anything. Outside the sky lightened, threatening an early dawn. When she saw Peter lying beside her, little bits and pieces of the previous 'day' came back, and she got to her feet. Looking down at herself, she frowned.

A thick black dress, she thought, would not do at all for adventuring.

It was heavy and would sink in water. It was awkward and would tear in a battle. It had gotten caught on branches as they were flying through the forest. And black happened to be her least favorite color. She preferred blue, like blueberries, or the sky towards evening, or... and she hated to admit it, even the blue of Peter's eyes.

Slipping carefully from bed, she tiptoed to the window and leapt nimbly through, hovering in the air, and flying through the trees swiftly.

It was fun, she thought. She could not remember, like much else at that moment, the last time she had so much. She flew faster and faster, in and out of the trees, high in the branches and then lower to the ground until someone's hand reached up and caught hold of her ankle.

Thinking it a pirate, Mary whirled, her black curls still loose and flying, and screamed instinctually.

It was not a pirate, but an Indian, Princess Tiger Lily, to be exact.

"Let go!" Mary complained, trying to yank her leg free.

But Tiger Lily held fast to it.

Being native to Neverland, Tiger Lily was still a child in the matter of Peter and Mary, but was also treated like an adult. In truth, she was not really a princess at all, but Peter had long ago decided that any girl warrior the Indians looked up to had to be royalty.

She was the oldest child of the Indians, but was more grown up than either Peter or Mary would ever be. Still very much a girl, Tiger Lily also knew things the adults knew, and felt the things they did. She worked as hard as any adult, and two braves put together, and she was strong. The respect she had, she earned.

So when Mary began to struggle, Tiger Lily, having some experience with catching flying children, jerked back with all the might of her tightly muscled body.

Mary, unprepared for such a jerk, went tumbling backwards into a tree. The air rushed out of her lungs and she landed with an oof!, her skirt up around her waist. "Hey! Watch it!"

Tiger Lily moved forward, drawing her blade and lifting it under Mary's chin. A smile curved her lips and she asked in carefully chosen, accented words, "What sort of a pirate flies?"

"I'm not a pirate," Mary said haughtily, folding her arms on her chest. She was mindful of the blade at her throat, but still a little put out at being called a pirate.

"What bandit then?" Tiger Lily asked, tapping the neckline of her black dress with the end of the handle of the bone blade, the tip poking the soft skin under Mary's chin.

“I know what I’m dressed like,” Mary said, turning her head to keep the tip of the blade from puncturing her skin. “Where do you think I was going?” she asked.

“Hunting for Peter Pan, likely, bandit,” Tiger Lily spat the words out distastefully. “Who is at least not my enemy, and perhaps even my friend, and I will not let you find and skewer him.”

“Peter Pan?” Mary asked, for a moment the name escaping her. And then she happened to remember the boy she had woken up next to. “I’m not hunting for Peter. I know exactly where he is.”

“You *know*?” Tiger Lily growled out at shouting level and pulled her knife back, ready to strike.

“Oh come on!” Mary said, lifting her hands, “Have you ever seen a bandit fly?” She flinched as the blade neared her eye.

Tiger Lily pulled the blade away at the last second. “No,” she said thoughtfully. “A pirate once when they raided the Faerie tree, but never a bandit. They are not so smart as that.”

“There,” she said. “So I am not a bandit. And there are no girl pirates allowed. They jinx the ship. I am just looking for some other clothes. These are no good for Neverland.”

Tiger Lily considered the clothes Mary was wearing and nodded in agreement.

And then Mary got an idea, “Can you help me?”

“I do not even know your name,” Tiger Lily said, sitting back and folding her arms on her chest.

“Mary Elizabeth Wells,” she replied. “And you are?”

“Princess Tiger Lily,” the other girl replied, feeling a little threatened at Mary’s rather long name. She tucked her bone blade away at her waist nonetheless, “And if you are not to be confused by everyone, it would be best for you to wear something else.” She got to her feet and offered Mary a hand up.

Hesitantly, Mary took the hand offered and got to her feet. She dusted off her dress.

“Follow,” Tiger Lily said. She turned and headed into the jungle.

After a moment of cleaning herself, Mary stepped off the ground and followed after, thinking how nice it was not to have to walk everywhere anymore, even though she could hardly remember when she could do nothing but walk.

*

While Mary was out making acquaintances with the Indians, Peter finally woke from his own slumber, and dawn broke over the mountains properly. He cast off the blanket Tink had covered them with, and, finding himself alone, flew out to look around for Mary.

Tinkerbell found him once he’d returned from a quick fly around, and Peter started pretending to forget who Mary was. “I don’t know who you’re talking about,” Peter said, starting his game of pretend. Tinkerbell objected loudly, and finally Peter gave in. “She said she wanted some proper clothes, yesterday. Maybe she went looking for some.” He moved around the tree

house, checking his dagger and collecting his sword. "Maybe she's been captured by bandits, and taken to their lair!"

What Peter never quite seemed to understand was how much affect he had on Neverland. Mary, having not remembered the dangers of the place, had gone off without a sword and quite unprepared for an adventure, dressed inappropriately or not. Tinkerbelle, and all of those before her, never seemed to have Peter's problem recognizing the boy's weight in Neverland. So when Tinkerbelle heard Peter say bandits might have her, she knew that was likely where Mary would end up. And the two of them made ready, and set off in search of her.

*

Tiger Lily took Mary back to the Indian village and into her own hut, and the two of them cobbled together an outfit that Mary was much happier with. They became tenuous friends; enjoying creating the outfit for adventuring the way other girls will dress up dolls, and both wore proud smiles on their faces as Mary slid into the new outfit.

Mary now wore pants that came down past her knees, and a shirt that was nowhere near as constricting as the top of the black dress had been, but was much less proper for a young girl to wear. Tiger Lily had showed her how to braid her hair so that it would stay without a tie, because they both agreed that a bow in her hair would make the outfit look much less tough, and had found a belt for her to tuck her weapon into.

And then both girls looked up. Mary because she realized that she had no weapon, and Tiger Lily because she heard something outside. Mary thanked Tiger Lily and flew the black dress back to the tree house for safekeeping, surprised to find Tinkerbelle and Peter missing. So she turned around and flew

back to ask Tiger Lily's assistance again, grabbing a sword on her way out of the tree house, just in case. She also liked the look of it as it hung from the belt at her hip, but it *was* mostly for protection.

All things considered, Mary, Peter, and Tinkerbelle arrived at the Indian village about the same time to find it under attack by bandits. On opposite sides of the enclosure, Mary and Peter joined in the fight, drawing swords and attacking the bandits.

Mary had never held a sword before, much less been in a swordfight, and so she was disarmed in short order. She happened to catch a glimpse of Peter as she was being backed towards a tree. Peter, wild brown-blond hair flying, was battling the bandit leader, Black Jack. Mary knew she needed help, and the braves were all busy with their own bandits. Tiger Lily was out of sight. "Peter!" Mary shouted. But it was too late for her. The bandit bearing down on her knocked her over the head with the butt of his cutlass and scooped her up under one arm, darting after his retreating comrades.

Peter turned to look at the sound of his name, but only saw retreating bandits, and narrowly escaped the parting musket shot of the bandit leader as he ran off with his men around him.

Once the bandits were gone, the Indians began cleaning up, and Tiger Lily found Peter. Before he could ask, she said, "Mary," quite out of breath and sweating from her battle, offering up the sword that the other girl had lost.

"I didn't see her," Peter said, smiling at his friend. "Did you? How do you know her?" It had been a long time since Peter had seen Tiger Lily, and he felt a slight twinge of jealousy that Tiger Lily's first word on seeing him again should be Mary's name.

“She was flying around the forest this morning,” Tiger Lily began. The Indians always called the junglewood a forest, despite the palm trees standing next to pine trees and the parrot-looking birds mixed in with the owl-looking ones. “Wearing all black. I thought she was a bandit. Anyone would have,” Tiger Lily said defensively. Getting on Peter’s bad side was easy. It happened often and without warning. When the mood struck him, Peter could have quite a temper.

But this time he just nodded, agreeing easily.

“She said she knew you,” Tiger Lily finished, as though that should explain everything.

“She does,” Peter replied with the slightest of confused frowns. He did not like showing that he did not understand things to girls. “And now?” he prompted.

“The bandits must have her. I guess we took too long to find her new clothes,” Tiger Lily said with a shrug. “Since the battle, I’ve only seen you.”

“There’s no help for it then,” Peter said, tucking Mary’s sword into his own makeshift belt and standing with a stretch. “I’m going to go and kill some bandits.” He waved to Tiger Lily and lifted off the ground, headed for the lagoon that used to be only pirate domain.

The *Jolly Roger* still floated in the water, filled with lesser pirates trying to make a name for themselves, but since the bandits had made the onshore caves their home, the pirates had become more and more sneaky about getting ashore and into the junglewood.

This flight was strange to Peter, though, as he headed up into the trees to make his way towards the bandits. For the first time in hundreds of years, and hundreds and thousands of adventures, Peter got lost among the trees, which seemed somehow thicker. He flew up towards the tops of the trees to get a look around. As he looked out over Neverland, Peter could actually see the island growing larger.

The junglewood seemed to get denser, trees shooting up around him. Peter zoomed higher, hitting the line of the lowest clouds, and continued watching in amazement at what was happening to Neverland. The water in the lagoon seemed bluer, and the sun overhead shone brighter. The mountains straightened up, and the sound of animals came at once from everywhere. It was as though all the animals and all of everything had been hibernating, and had suddenly woken up and shaken off sleep.

The *Jolly Roger's* Long Tom exploded in a puff of smoke, and the cannon ball flew all the way to the distant rocks of the mountain where the dragon was slumbering. The rocks looked almost exactly like ruins, and, as Peter watched, became a full-fledged castle, worn out and tumbling.

Arrows from the Indians shot up through the trees at him, and Peter could see Tiger Lily pointing him out to the firing braves that surrounded her. Whatever was affecting Neverland was affecting its inhabitants, obviously, Peter thought to himself. It had been longer than Peter could remember since he and Tiger Lily had exchanged arrows. After the Lost Boys had all been found, the two of them had made a casual alliance. It always seemed, however, that Tiger Lily wanted something from him.

Peter still was not sure that he wanted to deal with what else Tiger Lily wanted from him, but it was better than going on adventures all on his lonesome. And Tiger Lily was good to have

at your back in a fight. So he was confused at her actions, but not too upset. There were other people to play with.

Tinkerbelle swooped around him protectively, as though her tiny body could stop an arrow, and stuck her tongue out at Tiger Lily. Quickly Peter flew higher, away from the trees, up into the clouds and then down towards the lagoon and the cave. He and Tinkerbelle made their way down to the lagoon, hoping to find the entrance to the Bandit Cave and a way to rescue Mary.

*

Mary was carried, unconscious, until just before the troop of them reached the Cave, during which Neverland had woken up and started growing, as Peter observed. When she woke, held with one bandit's arm around her waist and being hauled at a smelly, muscled hip, the island snapped into place quickly, as though afraid she would see it changing clothes.

Once awake, Mary squirmed and kicked until the bandit dropped her and drew his sword, advancing on her with a curse on his lips. Mary screamed so loud that the bandits' leader came along, shouting for her to be silent, but it was too late. The volume of her scream had caused the birds to light from the trees nearby, and had given Peter and Tink a clue which way to go.

The dunes leading down to the lagoon had grown over with brush, and mist rose from the water, rolling up the sand towards the knot of returning bandits when the bandit leader stalked forward. "Quiet, girl!" Black Jack snapped.

Black Jack had gotten his name from his eyes, which sucked the light from the very sky into them like two miniature black holes. Stories that told of Black Jack were ones that parents tended not to buy for their children, because he was so

questionable. The two black holes of Jack's eyes were also said to be able to steal someone's soul, and as most parents have problems admitting things like that happen, Black Jack's infamy was well documented, but unread.

Mary took a step back, drawing in another breath to renew her scream.

"I said quiet!" Black Jack snapped. "Or you'll taste the cold of my steel in your gullet!"

Always having been a precocious child, Mary had no qualms about bandits, and let out the scream she had been building up to with her inhaled breath. When Black Jack moved to slit her throat, Mary, who had not been tied up while unconscious, dove between his legs and rolled away, darting quickly into the brush.

Black Jack was furious, but was too large to really complain that she had beaten him with that particular move. So instead he lifted his fingers to his lips and let out a commanding whistle.

Normally, or at least normal to Jack, the whistle would draw bandits from the cave that were waiting in case of emergency or necessity. Usually they were drunk if they were on reserve status, as Jack liked to call them, but the number of them was usually enough to scare away the pirates.

That was before Mary.

Before Mary, Black Jack had been a shady character. He stole and killed. According to the stories no one let children read, he swallowed the souls of his victims into his ebony eyes, sucking the very life from their bodies.

But now... as with Neverland, things had changed a little. Now when Black Jack whistled, there was the braying of hounds that called back in answer. The slobbering beasts came barreling up the sand dune from the entrance of the Cave and ran past their master into the forest after Mary. The animals, Black Jack's hounds, looked something from a nightmare. The canines looked to be a cross between wolves and lions, with large maws filled with foul looking teeth.

Mary found it quite impossible to fly while running. At the first sound of the hounds, which she knew from her nightmares to be of monstrous proportions and to have slobbering jaws of sharp teeth, she was far too frightened to remember how to fly. She could not outrun them forever, she also knew, and could almost feel them snapping at her heels.

Luckily for her, Peter was nearby, and he swooped down to pick her up as the hounds closed in. As though Peter were made of faerie dust, Mary remembered how to fly, but clung tightly to Peter, and was grateful for the arm around her waist nonetheless. Peter dropped her off with a sword on a high branch of the tree the hounds were circling. Below the beasts brayed and howled in defeat.

"Shh," Peter said when Mary started to protest that they should flee. She fell silent, and watched as Peter pointed out the line of moving foliage. The two children watched as the procession trailed up towards them, and Peter signed with his hands that he counted only ten.

Black Jack led the bandits after the hounds with a sinister grin on his face, his sneer the first face they saw as the group of them emerged in the clearing just beyond the one the dogs were circling, Peter swooped down towards them, crowing bravely.

Jack was so surprised that he fell over backwards, toppling his men down.

Peter fought bravely, and it wasn't until Peter had taken down two of Jack's men that the bandit leader thought to whistle for the dogs. They were new to him as well, you see. When Peter heard the barking round on him and come nearer, he leapt again into the sky, leaving Black Jack to howl in disappointment.

"ONE DAY, PAN!" he shouted. "NO AMOUNT OF FLYING WILL SAVE YOU!"

"I'll be waiting for when you aren't hiding behind your dogs, Jack!" Peter crowed back.

Peter did not remember that before he had his hounds, Black Jack had hidden behind his bandits, and long before there were hounds or bandits to hide behind, a very young Jack had hidden behind the bars of a crib from a boy peering angrily at him through a frosted window.

Not knowing this, Peter flitted off to collect Mary, and together they headed back to the tree house.

Four: Proper Sword Fighting

The tree house, it must be said, was usually a complete mess. It had once belonged to Wendy, the first Wendy, and once she and that batch of Lost Boys had gone home, Peter had moved it to the top of a very special Nevertree that Peter called the Two-P-Tree. The Two-P-Tree was a singular tree that had begun growing when Peter was born. You see, some children have trees in Neverland, special trees that turn however the child does as they grow up. And so the Two-P-Tree had been growing a long time because Peter had been in Neverland a long time. Unlike Peter, the Two-P-Tree, a Nevertree of exceptional intelligence, grew strong and sturdy and tall. Not all children in Neverland manage to avoid growing up, you see. The Lost Boys often had a terrible time staying young enough for Peter to keep playing with them, when there happened to be Lost Boys. And there was

always the problem of girls wanting to grow up and become ladies and women and wanting Peter to come along with them.

It was since Wendy's daughters and descendants had stopped coming to visit Peter in the springtime that the tree house had gotten so messy as it was then. But Mary, being a rather unusual girl, or so Peter considered from what *he* knew of girls, did not mind that the tree house was messy. In this regard, Peter was rather impressed with Mary. She was brave enough not to cry when abducted by bandits, which meant Pirates would likely likewise be un-troublesome to her, she was not afraid to fight back, and, and this was most important of all... Mary had not forgotten how to fly and was rarely, if ever, tired out by it.

It was quite a wondrous thing to Peter, who had spent years with girls who would wake up in the morning and have to be re-dusted with fairy dust in order to lift off the ground again. He knew there was someone, perhaps special, who had these problems first, but could not remember exactly who.

Mary's deficiency with a sword, however, was unacceptable, even though he had not seen it himself. And so Peter resolved to teach Mary how to use a sword properly, something that he recalled all the Lost Boys, ever, knowing automatically. This was, of course, untrue. Most of the Lost Boys learned very quickly when fighting pirates, and from numerous lengthy drills conducted by Peter himself.

It was harder than it started out to be. Mary did not lack courage, one of her admirable qualities, but instead she lacked form and concentration. Tinkerbell was most amused to find that Peter's newest game consisted of drilling Mary as he once had all his Lost Boys.

Tinkerbelle was amused because he seemed not to notice that Mary showed little interest in it. Peter had had ages to study such things, and as many enemies as his imagination, and the imagination of every child who ever dreamt of Neverland, had been able to come up with over the years had eventually taught Peter all he ever needed to know, and all anyone ever *could* have known about swordplay.

But it was all a bit overwhelming for Mary, and so at night, or after the last of the day's practicing, she would fly off, with Tinkerbelle trailing after for safety, to be by herself for a while. Peter let her go, and would usually wander off on some other game, or get into an adventure by himself.

One evening, when it was still quite late and neither Mary nor Tink had returned, and Peter was bored of his adventure, he took a sword and went out looking for them. He searched the junglewood, and the mountain, and even flew out past the *Jolly Roger*. He was returning to the tree house when he found them down near the lagoon.

Tink and Mary were practicing with arrows, something that Mary was always quite happy to do, and enjoyed. Tinkerbelle would fly up and knock down fruit from a Nevertree, and Mary would try to shoot the fruit from the sky with her arrows. The mermaids made quite a game of catching the speared fruit just before it hit the water and batting it to the shore near Mary's feet.

There was quite a pile, and also some floating fruit that Mary had missed. When Peter approached, he saw that Mary had sat down and was clapping as the mermaids were playing a game of catch with the floating fruit. At once Peter was seized with jealousy that the mermaids should be playing with someone else, and he picked up a fruit that had been tossed too far and threw it, hitting Mary in the back of the head and barely missing hitting her

with the protruding arrow. Mary fell forward into the water from her perch on an outcropping rock, letting out a yelp. She broke her bow, and was soaked from her nose to her toes.

Peter laughed loudly.

Mary turned to glare at Peter, and picked herself up, stamping a bare foot in the water, and lifted out of the water to fly off.

“That’s just like a girl!” Peter crowed at her.

Now normally it was Mary’s tendency to disregard confrontation, but feeling rather abused by Peter, she turned and flew towards him, shoving him right out of the air and to the ground. Peter locked an arm around her waist and the two of them fell together into the brush.

When Tinkerbelle finally pulled them apart, Mary had a split lip and a bruise on her cheek, and Peter had a black eye. Both children pointed at one another’s faces, and it was Mary’s turn to laugh.

“What?” Peter asked, getting up and marching over to the shallows of the lagoon to inspect his appearance. When he saw his black eye, he marched right back over to Mary and tackled her into the foliage, laughing as loudly as she did.

Tinkerbelle sighed, not quite sure what to make of all this, and just waited for the two of them to stop fighting. She flew up and lounged on the leaf of one of the plants, showing herself off to her best advantage, though there was no one to notice, until again the children fell apart, still laughing and panting.

Some of Mary's thick hair was still in Peter's hand, and there was blood trickling from the corner of Peter's mouth. Smiles graced both smudged and dirtied faces, and they clasped one another's hands to get up. Mary dusted herself off.

"When will I get to go on a real adventure, Peter?" Mary asked, spitting blood from her split lip onto the ground. Peter had refrained from taking Mary on his more dangerous adventures because of her sword deficiency.

"Whenever you like," Peter said with a charming grin. "Winter's coming down here, so the mountains should be warm enough for bear wrestling soon. You fight like one, so you should have no trouble."

"And the dragon?" Mary asked, re-braiding her hair where it had come undone. "What about him?"

"The dragon!" Peter exclaimed, leaping to his feet and thence to the air. "I had almost forgot!"

"You had forgot," Mary said, zipping up in front of him with her broken bow in her hands. "And you're not going after him without a shield, Peter. It's only fair." She did not add that it was fairer to him than to the dragon that he have a shield.

She did not know how much fairness mattered to Peter at that moment, though she would soon learn of it. "Fair?" Peter asked, considering. It was of the utmost importance to Peter, actually.

"Quite fair," Mary announced, understanding a little of what was to come later.

“Then grab your bow and arrows, and I my sword... we’ll steal a shield from the pirates.”

“That would be wonderful, Peter... but you broke my bow,” Mary said, holding it up and waving the two pieces in front of his face.

Peter hated having his adventures interrupted, but Mary did have a point, and it was his fault. He tapped his foot on nothing and turned to fly back towards the junglewood.

“Peter!” Mary called, flying after him. She did not think stealing was very fair, but decided for the moment to keep those thoughts to herself.

“Then first I’ll steal a bow for you from the Indians, and then we’ll go rob the pirates!”

“That doesn’t sound very nice. What did Tiger Lily ever do to you?”

“She shot at me of course,” Peter said, stopping. “How is it not nice?”

“Stealing is wrong, Peter,” Mary said, quite unsure if she ought to be saying that to him at all. “I could just take your bow.”

He paused again, thinking. “It’s not really stealing from the pirates. Especially if there’s a fair fight. Then it’s spoils of battle.” He shrugged. “Fine. Let’s go get you my bow and then we’re off to fight the pirates.” He darted forward, grabbing her hand, and dragged her all the way back to the tree house.

Once both had gathered things, Mary more arrows and Peter a more proper sword than the one he had chosen hastily

when looking for Mary and Tink, they flew directly to the *Jolly Roger*.

Of the battle aboard the ship that afternoon, it can only be said that Mary imagined shooting pirates as she had shooting apples, a matter of skill and timing. Of those that survived Peter's sword and Mary's arrows, more than a few were given the prefix of "one-eyed" to their names. The two children tore a swath through the pirates until enough were cowering or had jumped overboard that they could walk unhindered to the treasure hold.

More gold than Mary could imagine was held on the lowest deck of the ship, and she ran her fingers through jewelry and bullion before Peter lifted a crown from the pile and thumped it on his head. "I am King Pan," he announced in a very serious voice. He found another crown and plunked it on Mary's head.

Mary turned to find a mirror, a gilded silver thing, and was pleased at the look of her dark hair twining around the golden crown on her head. "That makes me Queen Mary Elizabeth."

"That sounds awful," Peter said, folding his arms and tapping his sword against his cheek. "I've got it! We'll call you Queen Marilu! That's so much better!"

Mary had seen before little glimpses of Peter the Charmer, but this was the first time she had bothered to appreciate it. Lu had nothing whatsoever to do with her middle name, but she smiled at Peter, glad that he had bothered to think about it, and made a mock curtsy anyway.

"Now, to find that shield," Peter said, turning towards the treasure.

The two of them hunted through the pirates' treasure hold, but the only shields they found were the size of their entire bodies, and encrusted with jewels. "These surely won't do," Peter said, to which Mary agreed.

"Pirates have no use for real shields," Mary said thoughtfully, tapping her chin. "The bandits might have some, but there are an awful lot of them," she figured aloud. The noise of the braying hounds, and the warm wet of their slobber on her heels lingered in her mind.

"Then we shall have a grand battle with them, and invite the pirates," Peter kicked one of the jewel-encrusted shields over and placed his hands on his hips, the red tip of his sword just brushing the wooden floor of the hold.

"We did kill quite a few pirates," Mary said.

"There will be more."

"I will eventually run out of arrows," she reminded him.

"Then you will use your sword," he said, grabbing her hand and heading up the stairs out of the hold. "You're not horrible with it, just not perfect."

On deck, the pirates had regrouped, wet and wounded, and waited in a loose knot for the children to come back up. Thieves and varlets, they called the children. Evil. The pirates waited at the rear staircase.

The children looked as though they had lost the battle as they left the stairwell, but really it was the scuffle on the beach that had lead to the cuts and bruises and the black eye and bloodied faces. Not bothering to fight their way back through the

pirates, the two of them flew up and away from the ship, right over the swords raised towards them and swirling around the fired shots of pistols. Tinkerbelle, who was seated in Peter's crown, stuck her tongue out at the pirates as they left.

"We'll give the pirates time to get mad," Peter said as they flew away, crowns still crooked on their heads. "And then we will lure them to the Bandits' Cave and start a battle!" He was excited. "It's the only proper way to have a battle... with your enemy rested and prepared."

He sounded so happy at the idea that Mary laughed. As they flew carefully through the junglewood, she collected sticks for arrows and asked, "What of the Lost Boys, Peter?"

Peter scowled at the question. "No such thing as prams, no such thing as Lost Boys," he said angrily.

"Prams?" Mary thought aloud. "Perambulators? Strollers?" Mary scratched her head. "But the only thing that's changed is the word, Peter," she protested. "Now they're called strollers... or walkers."

Peter made a face and yanked a twig from her pile to swat at the head of a passing bird. "Whatever," he said in pretend indifference. Really, he was excited at the idea. More Lost Boys? Everything was so much more fun with more children around. He glanced at Mary. Not that he disliked having her with him.

Mary was a lot of fun.

Mary yanked the stick back, and headed for the tree house so she could make her arrows.

Most of the time anyway, Peter thought as he followed, pulling out his pipes. Tink landed on his shoulder to sing along. He somehow knew the words she was singing, but could not remember why, or even understand them, really. And Peter always understood Tink, and all his fairies.

*

It was several days before the arrows were all ready to Mary's exacting stipulation, and in that time, Peter was buzzing in and out a lot. He had not told her he was going to do it... but Peter was making her a new bow. When it was finished, somehow, she was too, and Peter announced that it was time to attack the bandits and find a shield to attack the dragon.

Mary saluted, playing along with him being captain, and went to take his bow down from the wall.

"Mary," Peter said, stopping her.

"Yes, Peter?"

He had been hiding the bow behind his back, a little awkwardly, and he pulled it out in front of him and handed it to her. Mary blinked, surprised, and took the bow from him. "Oh Peter," she said.

And of course Peter expected the same reaction that girls always had for presents he gave them. A kiss. But Mary was much more involved in stringing her new bow and drawing an arrow back to think of such a response, and so Peter had to settle for the smile that spread across her face. The beautiful and infectious smile.

Then they gathered their weapons, put on their crowns, and the three of them set off as though hunting, until they took a turn for the lagoon. Mary hung back among the trees, while Peter taunted the crew on board the *Jolly Roger*. It was Mary's idea to disable Long Tom, and she flew nearly as quickly as Tinkerbell once the cannon was rolled out on deck. The two of them cut the wick and then Mary yanked the pins holding it in place and darted away again while the pirates were chasing after Peter.

The captain, Blue Bart, ordered his men to fire the cannon sooner than Mary or Peter had expected, and Long Tom blew from its holdings, falling straight through the deck. Peter darted across to Mary, and the two of them stuck their tongues out at the pirates and dove over the railing of the ship into the water with a splash. They swam towards shore, keeping pace with one another.

Peter knew a thing or two about pirates, having extensive experience with them, and the challenge he and Mary offered was one no self-respecting pirate could ignore. In fact, even a non-self-respecting pirate would have a hard time ignoring it. So once the children hit the water, Blue Bart hollered for the pirates to gather swords and pistols and to follow.

Peter and Mary waited patiently and watched the commotion. Hats were secured, swashes were buckled, and finally the first of the pirates splashed into the water. Lickety-split and the children were off, swimming for the beach once more.

The entrance to Bandits' Cave was just around the great rocks on the left end of the lagoon, which changed depending on what hour of the day it was, as Peter thought every day after two, without realizing it, that right was left. At just before two, Peter and Mary and Tink darted around the rocks, and then, as it was after two, the pursuing pirates had to run the length of the lagoon again in order to catch up.

By the time the pirates rounded the rocks, Peter and Mary were well hid in the foliage on the dunes. The commotion called out the bandit sentry and roused the hounds. The nightmarish canines loudly announced the pirates' arrival with braying and growling.

On watch, the slightest bandit of them all was waiting. He was called Gregor Mums, so called because he had two tongues and always spoke with a lisp because both of his tongues wanted to try and speak at the same time. He stalked out of the cave entrance with a grimace on his face, because not much charged the Bandit's Cave without good reason and wanting a good fight.

It was most unfortunate for the pirates, however, because Mums shot first and spoke second, because of his irregular speech pattern, and the same was true for the pirates. Even a fierce highwayman like Mums was no match for twenty soggy, armed, and angry pirates.

Two pirates fell with bullets in various uncomfortable places, and then Mums was drawing his swords, cutlasses to be exact, ones he had stolen from a pirate in a prior battle, when the pirates surged forward in retaliation, guns blazing.

Mums was a courageous bandit, to say the least, but eighteen screaming pirates would make even Peter blink, and so Mums retreated into the cave, loosing the hounds as he made his way deeper into the hide-out. The pirates charged after, only to flee the cave entrance moments later with Black Jack's hounds on their heels.

In the bushes atop the hill, Peter and Mary barely stifled their giggles. The pirates regrouped, only to find hounds, bandits, and now the Bandit leader himself waiting as they turned. Both

groups snarled, teeth flashing, and no pleasantries were exchanged before the battle commenced. Black Jack and Blue Bart moved forward and kicked their men into action.

The children waited until both sides were entirely engrossed, and then Peter signaled that they should descend carefully. The hounds would not be fooled, but Black Jack and Blue Bart, the current pirate captain, were engaged in quite a serious scuffle. The hounds would not attack without Jack's order, Peter knew, and their master was far too busy to listen to their whimpers.

So with very little fuss, Mary and Peter found themselves sneaking into the caves, and made their way down towards where Peter was sure the treasure was hidden.

"The trick will be getting back out," Mary said. Tinkerbelle agreed, and Peter hushed the two of them.

Down the damp, twisting caverns they went until the waves of the Never Sea could be heard echoing, and still no treasure rooms. A faint crying could be heard, but they ignored it until, quite by accident, Mary stumbled over a skeleton and fell face first in front of the iron cages where the Bandits' prisoners were kept.

Inside one of the iron cages was a boy, standing in tattered shipwreck clothes, half Peter's size and looking very frightened. When he saw Mary, his lips pressed shut over his crying and he fell down as well. Both children blinked at one another, and Mary laughed.

"Hello there," she said between her giggles.

Before the boy could answer, or even Peter could complain about being held up, there was a loud crash. "Long Tom," Peter said, grabbing Mary's hand. "We've got to get that shield!"

"What about-?"

"We haven't the time for both," Peter said impatiently.

Mary tugged on Peter's arm, "He's much better than any shield," she said with her charming smile and a wink of her dark lashes.

Peter hesitated for a moment, wondering what fun he had thought Mary was in the first place, and crashed the handle of his sword against the lock of the cage until it opened. Mary pulled open the cage door, and the boy darted out and away down the passage.

"Better than a shield, really?" Peter asked, taking her hand again.

"But Peter —"

"My turn!" Peter crowed. "Away from the pirates and bandits and towards the treasure."

"You don't even know where it is," Mary said with a shrug as they headed down another turn of the tunnel.

Peter trusted his luck, rightly so, having always been a lucky boy before, and soon enough, they found the treasure cave. Bandit treasure is different from Pirate treasure. Pirate treasure is almost always shiny, due to an unspoken rule among pirates. Pirate treasure *must* be shiny, so that the winner of a sea battle may collect the loot when the other ship is sunk. A ship, however,

is an expensive thing to come by, and diving for treasure is hard, so rarely do pirates sink each other, but everyone follows the rule anyway. Aside from the second unspoken rule, which is not to sink other pirate ships, and is *not* always followed, shiny treasure is one of the few rules they almost always adhere to. Or at least the pirates do in Neverland.

But Bandit treasure, being something rarely out of sight, is usually much more important than the pirate's shiny baubles. It may be shiny if it likes, of course, but must also be valuable. To the children's luck, atop a heap of stolen silverware sat two shields with only moderate sword scoring on them. Peter flew up and plucked them from the pile neatly, and tossed one to Mary.

"And now on to the dragon," Peter announced loudly.

Neither of them had noticed the sound of angry adult voices coming nearer, but Mary heard the growl of the hounds under Peter's announcement. "Quickly," she said, "hide."

The two children hid very well indeed, but as lights and the click of the nails of hound paws and the clump of heavy boots entered, Mary saw that the crown Peter had taken from the pirates had fallen onto the pile of silverware in their haste to hide. Mary winced. The crown was sure to be spotted and looked very out of place.

Black Jack commanded the hounds to sit and entered the room himself. "I know you're in here, Pan," he hissed between clenched teeth. "Come out and face me like a man."

Peter laughed, but from his hidden seat it came from all over, echoing in the treasure cave. Mary held her breath. "You can't make me a man," Peter crowed in a haughty voice.

With a whistle, Jack loosened the hounds, and they headed into the treasure vault. Their black noses sniffed at the ground, and the hounds were curious. The children were hiding, they knew, but their noses could not find out where.

Peter and Mary were pressed into the ceiling, hovering with their backs to the rocks. A noise alerted the bandits, and even Jack turned. When he turned back, Peter stood atop the silverware, sword drawn, shield over one arm, and with the golden crown once more seated lop-sided and precariously atop his head.

“Is this almost over?” Peter asked in a bored voice, hair wild and with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Shortly, I promise,” Jack snorted, drawing a pistol.

As Black Jack was firing, Mary flew quickly down in front of him, blocking with her shield as she went, and the bullet ricocheted off and hit one of the hounds in the head, killing it instantly.

Peter crowed, laughing, and saluted with his sword. He would not fight with guns. He had vowed never to touch the grown up weapons long ago. Mary did not know this, but had her own natural aversion to them that she couldn't remember the origins of.

The hounds rounded on Mary and she knocked an arrow in her bow, aiming expertly.

Jack whistled the beasts to a stop.

“Send them closer,” Mary dared, voice full of bravado of the decidedly false kind.

A noise from up the tunnel again resounded, sounding this time more like water than yelling, and a rush of water flooded the exit tunnel, filling the treasure chamber with water up the ankles of the bandits crowded behind their captain. The hounds whined pitifully.

Peter held his sword aloft challengingly. Black Jack ripped his swords from their sheathes and leapt forward. Oh what a battle it was, filled with clanging swords and sparks and rising water. Peter flew over the water carelessly, a graceful manner to his flight and the arc of his sword, while Jack sloshed through the water and stabbed and hacked at Peter in return, filled with dread purpose.

Mary perched atop her own pile of treasure, and as the water rose she shot off arrows into the bandits and struck the hounds with her shield when they got too close. But, as she had warned Peter, arrows ran out, and the bandits had guns. As she was drawing her sword, a gun went off, fired by one of the bandits, and struck her in the shoulder.

She cried out as she fell crashing into the water, and Peter, in response, shoved Jack backwards and threw a dagger that he had absently thought to bring, which embedded itself in the Bandit's shoulder. He deflected further shots with his shield, and moved over to fish Mary from the water and help her to her feet again.

A grimace was etched on Mary's beautiful face, and she bravely held her shield in front of her protectively. Peter growled at the bandits, but was interrupted by the echoing noise of ticking that seemed to erupt in the water-filling cave.

A shot was fired in a panic, and the bullet managed to sneak through the two children's shields, and lodged itself in

Peter's side. He screamed, unashamed, and the crocodile burst from the water, snapping up the bandit who had fired the shot.

Mary heard the voices of the mermaids first, and tucked her shield over one arm, and put the other around Peter's waist. He was losing blood, and held up mostly by his anger at having been shot. The water was up past their waists by this point, and the ceiling was closer than she liked as they scrambled across the piles of bandit treasure.

"What are you-?" Peter started to ask, but both children were sucked under the water by the glowing hands of mermaids, and pulled quickly into the lagoon and out of harm's way.

Five: New Lost Boys

Mermaids are not always so helpful as when they saved Peter and Mary that afternoon. They proved it by simply tossing them ashore. Several of the mermaids started an argument over whether or not to drown the children, as no other compromise seemed likely to be agreed upon, the answer was to toss the children out of the water like any other piece of flotsam or driftwood.

Mary was in too much shock to object, and it was not until after the mermaids left that she dared turn to look at Peter. He was conscious, but angry, and it showed on his face. There were little lines around his mouth, and a crease in his forehead. He was too angry, in fact, to respond to Mary's questioning look, or offer any bit of conversation to her about anything. Tinkerbelle swooped down, and looked the two of them over before flitting off into the trees.

“Tinkerbelle!” Mary called, letting go of the grip she still had around Peter’s waist for a moment. She darted after the fairy as far as her worry would allow. A clinking bell sound answered her, and Mary felt oddly reassured by it. She headed back to find Peter bleeding on the white sand. Mary headed over to put a hand over his wound.

She knew, somehow, that her mother had once done this, but did not remember her, or even what a mother was at that moment. The maid had closed the window to her room long ago, and the great black swathed house had been closed up tight. The only person to miss Mary had been a lawyer concerned with the will and the estate and his commission for it.

So she huddled down with Peter, who was too angry to even protest at the pain of her hand on his injury, and eventually Tinkerbelle came back with the largest contingent of fairies Mary had ever seen. Of course Peter had seen more, but in waiting he had fallen asleep, and his eyes were shut.

The fairies swarmed around Peter and picked him up, carting him right out of Mary’s grip. Mary got to her feet and started to follow when a separate swarm rounded on Mary, and she, too, was carried away.

It was just after the fairies had taken Mary and Peter away that a third child was tossed by the mermaids onto the beach. It was the boy Mary had convinced Peter to release from the cages. He had a much worse time with the mermaids, since he did not entirely believe in them, and had nearly drown when he struggled against them.

Had Peter been more awake at that moment, he would have realized there was a new child in Neverland. Or maybe if he had not been so involved with the adventure at hand when he

came across the boy, he would have noticed. But at that moment he was quite shot, and when they had met Peter had been most entwined with his adventure. So he did not.

It must be said that the boy was not a very wicked child, as children go, but only mostly scared of what had happened to him. His reaction was quite natural, considering that he had not the faintest idea how he had gotten to wherever it was that he found himself. He remembered Mary's kindness, though, and when he saw the trail of blood leading into the forest from where the fairies had carried the other two children, he followed it back to the Fairy Tree in the heart of the junglewood.

For anyone who has never been to Neverland before, it is worth saying that the beach of the lagoon is the most normal bit of it. The junglewood is wild and mismatched, filled with creatures from Peter's, and a thousand other children's imaginations, and there are all sorts of trees there that you would not expect if you were a logical thinking sort of person. Sounds follow you around even if there is nothing nearby to make them. Nevermountain is impossibly high when you are climbing it but looks most normal from the jungle, and the Neversea is turbulent once you pass out of the lagoon.

It took a lot of courage for the boy to continue through the rattling, angry sounding junglewood, especially following a trail of blood he could not be entirely sure was from the people he hoped it to be. He could very well, he reasoned, be following a bleeding pirate or a bleeding bandit that lost their way.

The glowing faerie doctors had tended to Mary's lesser wound first, on Peter's insistence, and the lullaby they had sung her while sewing shut her shoulder had put her into a fast, deep sleep. Peter, however, was very much awake and howling when

the curious and courageous boy's eyes found the two of them on the soft clover beneath the Faerie Tree.

"That hurts!" Peter hollered, the magic thread zipping through his wounded skin. The renewed pain in his side was enough to break the spell of his anger, and Peter's speech had returned most forcefully. It was the tiniest needle ever made that had truly hurt him, but he could not see it, and so he could not tell them that. All he saw was the sparkling thread moving back and forth.

"I can imagine," the boy said in reply.

All the junglewood froze and Peter had his dagger in hand before he even turned fully to meet the other boy's eyes. The faerie doctors were most displeased at Peter's movement, and made their various noises of displeasure.

"Hi," the boy offered, shrinking back in his skin a little. Another knife being pointed at him was not what he had hoped for from this boy. He had already had quite enough of that with the bandits in the cave, though they used swords as well.

"Who are you?" Peter demanded. "Pirate?" His face twisted in a snarl that growled under his words.

"No," the boy said, "I don't think so."

Peter ground his teeth together, "Bandit?" he hissed out.

"No, I don't think that's what I am either," the boy said. "Where are we?"

It had been such a long time since Peter had found a Lost Boy that he had quite forgotten what it was like. "Neverland," Peter said, tucking his dagger away cautiously.

"Oh," the boy said. "That's... great. Who are you?"

"Peter Pan," Peter replied, watching the faerie doctors go back to work on him. He was really rather unimpressed by the boy. "King of Neverland," he added, a broad smile spreading across his face. He looked over at Mary with a twinkle in his eye. "And that is Queen Marilu," he said, "shh. She's sleeping."

"Oh," the boy said, and then whispered again, "oh."

"What's your name?" Peter continued in his usual voice, ignoring that he had just asked the boy to be quiet and speaking at his normal volume.

The boy thought for a long moment, and found he had no answer for Peter at all. "I don't know that either," he finally confessed. "I think I may be lost, but mostly I'm just here."

Peter's broad smile shifted to include the boy, and the air got warmer between them. "Then you must be a Lost Boy," Peter said in a happy voice, a look of accomplishment about his face as though he had invented the idea of Lost Boys himself. In truth he had, but he never invented the boys themselves.

"Lost Boy?" the boy asked in response, clearly not following Peter.

"Children who fall out of their prams while their governesses aren't looking. They are sent to Neverland to defray the cost." Peter recited these words like a speech, and rarely put much thought into them when he said them.

“Pram? Governess?” the boy asked, still very confused.

“We will call you Mostly, then,” Peter announced, not pausing to answer the boy’s questions. He crowed a loud, proud crow at that. “You are Mostly Just Here.”

The boy thought it might have been a fairly silly name, for a moment, but after a moment, it faded away. And this is why. Peter’s crowing awakened Mary, who sat up with a start, reaching for the sword she lost in the water. Her dark hair was damp and hung heavy around her, loose from its usual braid, and her clothes were just as wet as her hair. She frowned at Peter when she realized he had woken her, but he shrugged it off.

“Hush,” Peter said in a benevolent voice. “We have a Lost Boy now,” he announced, as though he had come up with the young man himself. “Queen,” he said with a respectful nod to the boy as he took her hand, “meet Mostly. Mostly Just Here, Queen Marilu.”

At Peter’s gesture, and sight of Mary sitting up properly, Mostly stood up straighter, making an effort to look presentable in his soggy clothes. Tinkerbelle, who was sitting on a branch of the Faerie Tree with hawk-eyes on the watch for anything dangerous that might approach through the junglewood, chuckled and could not help but notice how Mostly reacted to Mary. The faerie doctors finished on Peter’s stomach, and the wild boy stretched with a yawn.

Mary noticed. “We’re out in the open and vulnerable,” she said, glancing around the small clearing and rubbing her arms through her wet sleeves.

“Too right,” Peter said, pulling his shirt back on and hopping up to his feet. He did not offer Mary a hand up. “We will simply teach Mostly to fly, and then-”

A twig snapped somewhere nearby. Mostly whirled with a scared expression on his face. First bandits, then mermaids... what was next?

Peter’s dagger tugged free of its sheath and almost sprang to his hand. Mary got to her feet wearily. “No time,” she said. “Let’s just carry him.” She looked around and nodded when she saw Tink. “Tinkerbelle,” she called.

The little faerie flew over, and Mary sprinkled Mostly with faerie dust before she grabbed the smaller boy by the shoulder, gripping his shirt firmly as she sprang into the air.

Peter followed with an annoyed growl. He took hold of Mostly’s other shoulder, and the children headed for the tree house. “I don’t like all this running away!” Peter exploded when they reached the small home. “It’s cowardly!”

“We were both hurt in that cave, Peter,” Mary said, gathering leaves from around the room to put a bed together for Mostly, who seemed particularly reactive to the faerie dust. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Peter’s livid expression. She stood and mustered her wits about her. “And Mostly cannot yet fly, and he has no sword. Go back and fight in the dark of the forest if you want, Peter, but we’re staying here.” She folded her arms on her chest at that, a dare in her expression.

“Girls are such bores,” Peter said, angrily, but with a yawn. He was sleepy, too, but would never show that he was actually feeling it by not going out and adventuring when he was dared to. He tossed his shield on the floor of the little tree house and

tucked his sword back in his belt and turned to dive out the window, flying off into the dark forest just as Mary had suggested he could.

“Sure we are,” Mary replied, glancing at Mostly as he slumped down in his leaf bed and fell fast asleep. She gathered a dagger, now too angry to sleep herself, and tucked it into her belt, snorting at the very thought of a boy who would be so foolhardy.

Of the two children, Peter was surprisingly the first back. His eyes twinkled with starlight and there was a little blood on his sword. He waved it impressively on his return, but with Mostly asleep in the corner there was no one to be impressed by it, so he shrugged, cleaned off the end of his sword, and went to bed.

In the morning, when Peter woke up, he was surprised to find only Mostly still sleeping quietly. That struck him as odd. Mary ought to have come back by then, but she had not. He got out of bed, picked up his sword from where he had left it the night before and flew off after her. A pity she always remembered to fly, he thought to himself as he swooped through the trees, perhaps she would get into fewer pinches if she forgot how to fly.

He ran into her, mid-air, almost immediately. Her arms were filled with fruit that fell to the forest floor with their collision. Peter took a moment to regard her, and saw that she was covered with dew and stardust, much as he had been the night before. He was instantly suspicious.

“Oh,” she said, swooping down to gather the fruit all up again, precariously in her arms. “I got hungry and thought you two might be too.”

Peter frowned. Something was wrong with that idea. Mary had gotten them all food? Why? When he went out adventuring,

he thought about nothing more than having fun. Last night, for example. He had gone out mad, and had a wonderful adventure involving a tree snake and his shadow, and all other thoughts had completely gone out of his head. When he was finished, and he and his shadow had beaten the tree snake and taken possession of the branch it was on, he had settled down and played his pipes and tried to remember what had him out in the middle of the night. He found he could not, and so he had gone back to the tree house and gone to bed.

Mary flew back up to Peter with a smile and headed towards the tree house with her armload of fruit. "Besides," she said, "we have to teach Mostly to fly and to fight."

Peter gave a shrug, and she led the way back towards the tree house. Her hair was intact, Peter noticed as he followed her. Where could she have been? What was different? Her smile was still bright, her bare feet still dirty.

In the tree house, Mostly smiled as they entered, not noticing a difference, or even that Mary had been gone at all. As they all sat down, cross-legged on the little floor to have breakfast, Peter forgot all about Mary's absence the night before. It was partly Peter's excitement about having a Lost Boy that made him forget, but in forgetting he grew impatient, and so the breakfast went very quickly indeed. The children talked of better things, and it was decided, with a large bit of gulp on Mostly's part, that flying would be first.

There were beaming smiles and excited giggles between the three children, but all the while in the back of Peter's mind was the image of Mary from that morning. The sparkle of her cheeks, the twinkle of her refreshed laughter. He still could not, for the life of him, figure out what it was that she could possibly have

been doing. And what bothered him more than that was that she had done it without him.

Finally the three of them sat back, full of fruit that tasted very good indeed to Mostly, and Peter called Tink. He leapt to his feet as the fairy came to him, and sprinkled fairy dust on Mostly.

“Now find a happy thought,” Peter instructed in the only serious tone that he knew. Peter was only ever serious about two things, before. Battle planning, or adventuring, as he liked to call it, and flying. Flying, to Peter, was of the utmost importance even though he occasionally forgot that people had to be taught.

Mostly, however, proved to be a problematic pupil, even for Peter. To Mary it was easily obvious that the tree house was not a good place for him to start jumping from, and so the three of them moved down to the ground, Mostly climbing swiftly and dropping the last two feet while Peter and Mary flew down easily, in demonstration. But try as they all might, and Mary decided to keep lending a hand when she saw how much trouble Mostly was having, none of them could manage to make Mostly fly. Peter eventually gave up, flying off angrily on an adventure of his own, and left Mary and Mostly in the small clearing.

Disappointing someone as important as Mostly felt Peter surely must be devastated the boy, and he sat down in the middle of the clearing and started to cry.

Mary, who had been making more arrows with a little knife that Peter had given her from his store of weapons, pressed her lips together at the sound of his crying. But then the dim recollection of her own problems with flying came back to her, and his tears reminded her of her own tears, and she remembered to be kind. “It’s ok,” she said, lifting the knife and the branches

again, in a much more sage voice than she had a right to have regarding flying, "these things take time sometimes."

It was a very grown up thing to say, but then Mary was just a little grown up anyway. Neverland didn't mind, and Tinkerbelle did not mind, and Peter did not even notice it. She clung very tightly to childhood, because she liked being happy, and so it all worked out fine, but on occasion little phrases wormed their way out of the inch of her left toe that was a little grown up, and for the most part no one paid attention to where they came from or how adult they sounded.

Mostly surely did not. Sniffling, he rubbed the tears from his eyes. "My thoughts are mostly happy," he said in a forlorn voice. "Do you think that will really change?"

"If you wish it," Mary said, "very hard." She offered him a smile to go with her consolation, "After enough time in Neverland, who knows?"

It was enough for Mostly, because she had smiled at him. From Mary, it was always enough with a smile. It didn't matter that Mostly never learned to fly. While in Neverland, he was always the bravest Lost Boy in battle, and kept near her when Peter was busy with something else, or could not keep it in his head to be. To Mary's credit, she did not know this at the time, and really did wish Mostly well.

Peter was another story. Not flying was a very serious offense in his mind. When Peter came back he barely looked at Mostly before flying up and bringing down two swords. He tossed one at Mostly's feet and lifted the other one menacingly.

Mostly redeemed himself to Peter by proving to be an excellent warrior. He picked up the sword and held it aloft, and

though he did not beat Peter, he did very well indeed. Few people, as I have already said, were able to beat Peter. Even fewer can manage to do it fairly. Mostly was better than Mary, even, and fiercer in a fight altogether, unless she happened to be angry.

To Tink's watching eyes, it was obvious that Mostly would obey Peter, to the letter and without fail, except for flying, but that he would follow Mary to the death if she went. It was only fair, after all, that a few of the Lost Boys should be concerned with Mary. Peter only noticed absently, because most of the Boys were more worried about Peter and adventure than a silly girl.

And more Lost Boys did come. All those that Peter kept were courageous and had the scent of adventure permanently in their hair and behind their ears, along with quite a bit of dirt.

But not a one of them could fly.

Six: The Song of Forgotten Forgots

Peter never quite got up the nerve to ask Mary where she really went late at night, after he fell asleep, though otherwise they were the best of friends and nearly inseparable. She did keep disappearing though. After dinner with the Lost Boys, who all referred to her as 'Queen Marilu', or sometimes just 'Marilu', Mary would work on making more arrows to replace the ones she had used that day, until Peter decided it was time for bed. Then the two of them would fly up to the tree house, and the Lost Boys would climb up the nearby trees and swing across the upper branches of the canopy to the Two-P-Tree that held the tree house. It took the Lost Boys much more time than it took either Peter or Mary. Oh, if only they could fly.

Somehow the two of them were never as sleepy as the Lost Boys, and so Peter would drill her on sword fighting, or play his

pipes for her while she sat and brushed her hair. The brush had been a gift from Tiger Lily the one day that they had been friends. Tiger Lily, one must understand, was very glad to find another girl in Neverland, especially one who was not like Wendy. And Mary was certainly *not* Wendy, flying did not tire her, and she did not take to crying, though not infrequently, while looking up at the black dress she had once worn, she would start crying.

The Lost Boys had staked the black dress high on one of the walls, and Peter called it a trophy, claiming it had been taken from the bandits during a raid.

Tinkerbelle had given up trying to comfort Mary, feeling the sensible thing was to leave her be, aware that soon enough she would forget the dress's origin all together, or Peter and the Lost Boys would burn it in a game and give it a different end.

Peter set down his pipes one evening and asked, "Why are you crying, Marilu?" He always called her that when he was being especially nice, and he tried to always be that way when she was crying. "Are you sick?"

"No, Peter," she replied, wiping her eyes on the heels of her hands and gazing up at the bandit trophy. Beside it hung skins and antlers from beasts the Lost Boys had proudly killed on the Nevermountain. "I am healthy... or at least I'm not sick."

"Well then why are you crying?" Peter asked.

"I don't know why I'm crying, Peter," Mary said. It was the simple, honest truth. She couldn't remember why she was crying any longer, only that the dress on the wall made her feel very, very sad.

“Well then stop it,” Peter said, again picking up his pipes. Mary wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her shirt, but Peter’s playing seemed to make it worse, and she couldn’t stop crying.

In her little apartment, Tinkerbelle hummed softly, and Mary got distracted from all her crying when she found she knew the words to the melody Peter was playing. So she sang along softly.

“This is a song of forgotten forgots
Things disregarded and remembered not.
Yesterwhens dissolve, futurewhens disappear,
Snuggled in dreams but ever so clear.

This is the song of forgotten forgots
From a world unknown to the world it is not
Forwards leading back, backs leading fro
No map-made-up guides or right ways to go.

This is a song of forgotten forgots
All keep thoughts loosened and kept not.
Most concerns fun, most duties play
Without ever order to lead for the day.

This is the song of forgotten forgots
In a place like none that could ever be bought.
Take a turn at the righting, if you can find wrong,
Make a place by the fire, and hear out this song.

All you once knew, gone from your head,
By night the faeries tuck you in bed.
Where all is inside-down and upside-out,
And dreams are what the world’s about.

For this is the song of forgotten forgots

One of many, the only it's not.
Now and then become evers,
And all is left young in the land of never."

Peter stopped playing his pipes halfway through, and just stared at Mary, unbelieving. The words were familiar, like something he remembered from a dream... or a fairy. He could never quite make them out when Tink sang along to his piping. There was always a different sparkle to her eyes, and a different smile in her voice when she perched on his shoulder to whispering along with this tune...

The same way that Mary looked when she sang it.

Peter threw the pipes at Mary's head. She ducked, thankfully in time, and blinked as she turned to look at Peter.

"Where did you learn that?" Peter demanded. His face was twisted up tight with anger.

"Tinkerbelle sings along all the time," Mary said defensively, rising and picking the pipes up. "I don't see why I shouldn't be able to too. What did you do that for?"

"That's my song!" Peter shouted, not quite loud enough for the Lost Boys to wake up. They were very heavy sleepers.

Mary hissed and threw the pipes on the floor, breaking them. "Tinkerbelle sings it!"

"You aren't Tinkerbelle!" Peter shouted back. "You can't!"

In a huff, Mary grabbed the blanket off the bed and rounded the room, gathering a few of her things, including the shield she got when they raided the bandits, and the bow Peter

had made for her. "Not a fairy, are you sure?" she asked Peter, the little bit of grown up in her toe slipping out once more. "Good-bye, Peter."

Tinkerbelle came down to look at the pipes, and then out the window as Mary flew off. She turned and asked Peter what he'd done that for.

"Nothing," Peter replied to the fairy, arms folded across his chest. "She'll be back. Just wait." He kicked some of the leaves on the floor and ran to the window, shouting after Mary, "But I won't miss her while she's gone!"

Of course Peter thought she would just get into trouble again, and need saving. But what he never understood about girls, and especially Mary, was how well they learn by example. Boys rarely understand this, or how much they do it themselves. He also never knew where she went late at night when she could not manage to sleep in the tree house with Peter and the Lost Boys.

Mary had a home away from the tree house, a secret place only she could seem to get to in the heart of the junglewood. It was almost always nighttime there, and there was a dazzling tall white waterfall that made a beautiful pool. And there were unicorns.

Along with dragons, Mary had always liked unicorns, and her secret place had three of them. Like her Lost Boys, they protected her from the rest of the Neverland denizens, especially those in the junglewood. All Mary had to do was bring a blanket and find her own food and there was hardly any way that she could get into Peter's supposed trouble.

She lived in a little cave behind the waterfall, and set up her own little house in her protected little grotto and didn't think much about Peter at all, except that he really ought to apologize.

The Lost Boys, when they woke, and they did, after she left as though her presence had been a spell, knew instantly that she had gone. Peter would hear nothing of going to look for her, and so Mostly made up a game that they called 'not looking' where all the boys really did was look for her. He knew Peter would eventually get upset about it.

In truth, when time passed and no one ran across Mary in their adventuring, Peter got very upset about it. But instead of saying anything, he took it out instead on the pirates and bandits and Never-creatures rather than saying a single word aloud. He was never much of a talker, but young boys are not to be expected to be, unless they want to be.

It was a long time before anyone dared ask Peter about her, and when they did, at first he just shrugged. When asked again, Peter did not comment. And since Peter did not, or would not mention it, they continued as Lost Boys and Peter Pan always continue. Their captain led them, and the boys all spent days adventuring and fighting pirates and bandits and making general mischief with the Indians.

Oh, for most of the time it was not a problem, most of the time he forgot who Mary was, and had all the adventure he could with the Lost Boys, but when he did remember who Mary was, and that she was missing... he got a peculiar feeling in the general area of his stomach. To Peter, who remarked on this only to Tink, he said that it was a strange sort of grinding feeling. It was quite a while after he noticed the grinding feeling before he decided to name it. He could not remember why Mary was gone, truly, but he knew he was not supposed to ask that sort of thing. Boys,

from what he had gathered, did not ask that sort of question, even though he was fairly certain Tink knew where Mary was.

Eventually, what came of Peter's ignoring Mary's absence was that he just felt alone again. Nothing that someone like Peter recognizes, but he started to get bored during adventures much more easily, and eventually he would look up at the black dress hanging on the wall and get very sad, until finally, one day when the Lost Boys were out looking for food, Peter sat down and cried.

It was unusual for Peter to cry in Neverland. He was always happy there, or at least almost always. But losing Mary was ever so much more painful than losing a Lost Boy, or having to get a new fairy. Both came and went as fast as... well... faeries. No new Mary came to replace the one of those he lost, though, and that was a strange event for him. And unlike the other losses, this was one he was certain he wasn't allowed to talk about with anyone.

When Peter cried in Neverland the stars overhead hid, blackening the sky above the blue, and the wind blew baby Neverbirds from the trees. The bandits hid in their caves, and the pirates ducked low in the hold of the *Jolly Roger*. The sky overhead boiled in black clouds, and a storm the likes of a little boy's temper brewed over the whole island.

*

In the remote clearing, one full moon set, and the next failed to appear. Mary had been humming quietly to herself when the clouds blocked the perpetual moon. She looked up and it seemed that all of Neverland was crying, even her own little grove seemed sadder than normal. The white of the unicorns was less bright, and the pool where the water from the waterfall collected was being churned by a despondent wind. Then she heard

muffled noises that sounded like someone crying, only that someone was crying with Peter's voice.

The noise grew much louder, but it still seemed to be Peter. Listening, she felt uneasy. Peter never cried. She flew up into the clouds and called out to him, "What's wrong?"

"I've lost my Mary," the wind echoed in reply.

Having been gone for quite a while, it was a shock to hear her name, and a comfort to be missed. When she realized he meant her, she asked, "Have you asked her back?"

"She's mad, and I can't find her," the wind roared in her face.

The wind was so strong that Mary was buffeted backwards from where she hovered in the air. "Have you tried apologizing?" Mary called.

"NO!" A gust of wind so strong with anger and sadness that it felt like a fist swatted Mary out of the sky, and she went tumbling into the pool of water at the base of the waterfall.

She frowned, wiping hair from her face, and flew back up towards the clouds again. "Do you even *want* her back?" she asked, deciding not to ask for an apology if that was the sort of response she would get.

"Very much," Peter's voice answered. A bolt of lightning cut through the sky, and raindrops pelted Mary. He must truly be crying, she thought.

"Then ask her," Mary said simply.

The storm quieted, and Mary was afraid that he had forgotten for a moment why he was upset when his voice asked softly, on a much gentler breeze, "Will you come back, please, Marilu?"

She thought for a moment, and then nodded. There was no response. He could hear her, then, and not see her. "Of course, Peter."

In truth, even she could not remember why she left in the first place.

Seven: The Ruined Holiday

When Mary came home, Peter sent the Lost Boys out hunting, and declared the day to be a holiday. He planned, for once an occasion so monumental that even *Peter* planned something other than a battle, a great feast to welcome her home, pretending, of course, that it had been his invention all along that had brought her back. The small clearing below the tree house was cleared for the occasion, and wood was piled for a great bonfire.

Mary flew into the tree house to find Peter alone, perched on his chair juggling some Never fruit. His broken pipes still lay where they had fallen on the floor. No one dared touch them when Tink had explained what happened to break them.

She threw the blanket she carried onto the bed, letting her few belongings spill over it, and bent down to pick up the pipes, hiding them away under her shirt quickly.

“Marilu,” Peter said, dropping the fruit into a sloppy mess on the floor and hopping up to his feet, “do you know any stories?”

“Plenty,” she said, replacing what few things she had taken when she had gone away around the room of the tree house. “But I’m sure you’ve heard them all.”

“That doesn’t matter so very much to me,” Peter said, “I’d still like to hear one.” Peter flopped across the bed, cushioning his head with his hands and watching Mary as she moved around the room.

Mary glanced at the hatch the Lost Boys used to climb in through the floor, and then turned her attention to Peter. “All right,” she said, hiding the broken pipes behind her back and sitting on the foot of the bed.

Peter moved to give Mary more space to lie down next to him, but she did not move forward. He remembered, a little, that she had been angry when she left, and so he slid off the bed and sat on the floor. He tipped his head to the side and watched her, leaning against an elbow, and Mary began to tell the story of Rapunzel as best she could remember it, which wasn’t very well.

“Once upon a time,” she said, fidgeting with the pipes behind her back. And then it occurred to her that perhaps she was living in a ‘once upon a time’, something that even a sensible girl like she had been could never have predicted, and then she caught sight of the corner of the black dress that was visible from her

seat. She remembered just enough to be sad for a moment, and then she continued with the story, starting over.

“Once upon a time,” she said, “there was a man and his wife. For years they had wanted a child, and finally... finally they were going to have one. The man was very happy, and did his best to keep his wife comfortable... but what she wanted most from him was a very certain type of vegetable.”

“I don’t think someone should want that,” Peter said. He was being a very good listener, he thought, but that was just not something he could let slide by in a story without questioning.

From her perch in the little fairy house, Tinkerbelle jingled her opinion on the matter. Mary was getting rather good at understanding the little fairy by this point, but what she thought the glowing woman said was, “Bologna tastes marshmallow.” To this, Peter nodded.

This made very little sense to Mary, so she decided to answer Peter’s response instead. “I agree with you, but this woman wanted a type of vegetable. But the only place to get it was from the garden of a witch.”

“Was it an evil witch?” Peter interrupted. “It would be good if she were an evil witch.”

“Yes, Peter, she was a very evil witch.”

Below the tree house, some of the Lost Boys built a fire and began to cook the feast as Peter had planned. Others went to gather Neverfruit and water. If only the Boys, who were all really good boys, and outstanding Lost Boys, had known how to fly, then perhaps Mary’s holiday would have been as uneventful as Peter had planned.

But Tiger Lily and the Indians were out hunting too, and when all the game was gone, scurried away into hiding after the Lost Boys' boisterous quest, the Indians decided to hunt the smell of the meal being cooked instead of the meat to make the meal. They came upon the small clearing beneath the Two-P-Tree, and the feast that was being prepared, *and* the Lost Boys preparing it.

With a great war cry, the Indians leapt out of the junglewood foliage at the unsuspecting Lost Boys, and a battle ensued. It was all in good fun, until one of the braves knocked over the plate Mostly had been making especially nicely for Mary. And then, Mostly got mad. He hollered loudly and ran his sword clean through the offending brave.

After this, the commotion got so loud that it interrupted Mary's story. She and Peter rushed to the window to see what had happened, Peter a little annoyed that his story was being interrupted, but interested in what was happening down below.

All around the clearing, the fighting paused. The braves stood shocked, and Tiger Lily was furious. Letting out a scream, she rushed Mostly, who quickly drew his sword, and the two locked blades amid the stunned and silent Lost Boys and Indians.

Mary flew down immediately, Peter following a hair behind her with a quizzical look about him, and Tinkerbelle shortly after. "Stop it," Mary said, reaching out to grab the arms of the two intent fighters, meaning to pull them apart.

The whole assembly of fighters gasped and held their breath. The Lost Boys, the Indian braves, and even Peter expected Tiger Lily or Mostly would turn and strike, thinking an enemy had intervened. Both arms moved, and Peter started to

move forward, intent on not losing the Mary he had just recovered, when something happened.

It was not that the expression on Mary's face changed so much as to be noticeable by the onlookers, but both Mostly and Tiger Lily stopped before either of their steel could touch her. Tiger Lily recovered quickly, and moved to strike. In a valiant effort to protect Queen Marilu, Mostly dodged in front of her knife, forgetting to raise his sword, and received his very first battle wound on Neverland. After the cut healed, Mostly would always proudly relay the experience to the other Lost Boys, and it always sounded much more heroic in the stories.

When Mostly fell to the ground, Mary balled a fist and punched Tiger Lily in the face, and the Indian squaw fell to the ground next to Mostly with a cut in her lip.

The circle of braves was shocked, and the Lost Boys cheered. Peter crowed proudly, and a victory dance commenced among the children. Tiger Lily shook her head angrily and looked up, expecting to find Mary sneering and towering over her. She was not prepared to find Mary's hand extended towards her.

Gingerly, Tiger Lily took Mary's hand and got to her feet.

For a long moment neither girl moved, and then Tiger Lily hissed, and turned on her heel. The remaining braves followed her warily back into the trees and away into the junglewood.

Mary blinked at her behavior, and the Lost Boys, urged on by Peter, hoisted her up onto their shoulders and paraded her around the clearing, dancing and jostling her along the way.

“On with the feast!” Peter announced, flying circles above her head, The Lost Boys who could clapped, “Hurrah for Queen Marilu!”

The Boys all shared a little, and Mary’s plate was once again filled with fresh cooked food. She smiled and accepted the attention a little awkwardly. Mostly’s face was bandaged by an obliging Tinkerbelle, and then Peter got to his feet and said, “I want the end of the story.”

“Story?” asked Giant, the smallest of the Lost Boys.

“What story?” Avid and Jammer asked, their heads popping up quickly.

There were nine Lost Boys by then, or at least nine that Peter let stay. It was a greater number of Lost Boys than Peter had previously allowed himself. The underground home began to look suspicious with too large a circle of trees surrounding it, and so he had allowed for only seven Lost Boys in the past. The tree house, however, had no such limitations on entrances, as the Lost Boys swung across by tree branches, and several could be swung from the same tree. Owing to that, and the long absence of Lost Boys from Neverland, Peter was expansive with his troop. Mary could hardly tell them all apart, except for Mostly, because she had helped find him, and Giant because he was so small. Giant tugged on her sleeve, “Tell us all the story please, Marilu?”

“I’ll tell you all the end of the story of Rapunzel,” Mary announced, unwilling to start at the beginning. Originally she had never intended to tell Rapunzel’s story, having deemed it a little improper to tell them. She was mindful of how impatient Peter could be. He looked that way at the moment, sitting across the fire from her with his arms folded on his chest, trying very hard to look like he was not waiting on anything.

“Rapunzel’s witch, when she found that the young woman had let the prince into the tower, cut off Rapunzel’s long hair, and cast her from the tower.” Mary got to her feet and bent herself over like the crone witch from her Rapunzel story, “Never come back!” she croaked at the Lost Boys and Peter.

The Boys all leaned away from Mary, excited and frightened at the same time. Peter’s face lit up with appreciation, and he leaned forward intently, elbows planted on his knees.

“And then,” Mary said, standing up to her own height, “the witch sat in the tower with what was left of Rapunzel’s rope of hair and waited for the prince to return.”

“I wouldn’t have gone back,” Owl said.

“Shut up!” Puddle said back, smacking Owl in the back of the head.

Owl took offense to that, and started to reply when Peter spoke up from his seat, “All of you sit down. I want to hear this, and if I don’t get to hear the end, you’ll *all* be sorry!”

The Lost Boys quieted down. Peter made an elegant gesture in her direction, and Mary continued her story. The fire seemed to grow larger in the circle of stones, the crackles of the popping wood came at helpful and appropriate time, and the smoke swirled overhead as Mary’s hands fumbled around as she helped to illustrate the banished wanderings of the blinded prince, until finally, he found Rapunzel.

Rapunzel, since Mary was playing the prince, turned out to be Peter. His hair was short enough, the children seemed to believe. Having been stumbling ‘blindly’ around the fire, Mary

tottered and finally fell to her knees, collapsing between the fire and Peter.

The Lost Boys all crowded around, the fire died down a little to let them all see, and Mary concluded the story. "The poor, blind prince," she said, clasping a hand to her own chest, her voice wavering as the prince's might, "exhausted from the years, collapsed on the doorstep of the very house that Rapunzel had retired to. Rapunzel heard the noise of someone outside, and when she came to see who it was..."

At this point Peter, entranced by the story enough that he did not care if he was playing a girl or not, got to his feet and took a step forward. Tinkerbelle was perched in his curly hair, and her glow made it look like he had a crown on.

"She was overjoyed to find her prince, so much so that she knelt down beside him and hugged him, tears falling from her eyes. As if by a magic spell, the prince's blindness was cured, and he felt strong again." With a little push from her elbow, Mary flew to her feet.

All the Lost Boys clapped.

"And they lived happily ever after," Mary said. "The end."

Peter let out a crow, and the Lost Boys applauded a little longer until they all seemed to let out a simultaneous yawn. "Go up on home," Peter commanded, looking around the clearing at the dwindling fire and then up to the height of the moon overhead. The shadows from the edges of the clearing were growing larger and more menacing. Even Tinkerbelle seemed to notice this, and she flew out of Peter's hair and followed the boys up to the tree house.

The sleepy Lost Boys protested half-heartedly, and then started up their separate trees and swung over to the tree house.

Mary started to fly up when she saw Peter looking around so alertly. She stopped before she even got off the ground, and Peter began to kick dirt on the fire. "Is something there, Peter?" Mary asked.

"Something is always there," Peter said as the two of them put the dying fire out. "Are you afraid?" he teased her.

Folding her arms on her chest, Mary tilted her head. "Why should I be? We fight pirates and bandits... we wrestle *bears*, Peter."

"Neverland is good for that sort of thing," Peter replied. He stepped into the air and extended a hand towards her, "Coming?"

The junglewood was quiet for a moment, but as the embers of the fires died out from the dirt stifling them, the hounds on the beach let out a howl at the moon, and the bears all scratched on rocks in the mountains, and the lions in their caves let out a yawning roar. The forest woke with a startling volume, as though someone had used a remote on it somewhere.

Mary reached out for Peter's hand, perhaps a little afraid of the midnight cacophony despite her earlier words, and stepped into the air beside him. Together they flew up to the tree house and crawled into bed. Tinkerbelle blew out the lights and crawled under the covers of her little bed in her tiny little apartment, and darkness crept over the tree house.

Peter hugged Mary that night, as tightly as he ever had his teddy bear, the one that Michael had left, or his shadow after it

had come off. Mary did not mind. She was glad to feel wanted, glad to be home, and glad that Peter had missed her. He seemed to forget so much else. She stayed awake for a long while, and Tinkerbelle stayed up and watched her until she decided it was silly for any of them to be awake and sung a soft lullaby to her.

And then Mary closed her eyes and fell sound asleep.

Eight: A Jealous Declaration

In the morning, Peter slept late, curled under the covers and hugging Mary. Mary, as usual, woke first, but some half-grown notion in her not-quite still childlike mind made her lay still. When that Lost Boys woke up, they threw a fit. Some of them, anyway. None of the Lost Boys had ever seen where Mary and Peter slept, or Mary anyway; everyone knew which bed was Peter's.

Mary had been gone every morning before they woke up.

One of the older boys, Avid, threw the biggest tantrum of his small life. Brother, so named because he could recall someone once saying that to him, tried in vain to quiet him. Mostly tried to help, as did Giant and Puddle, but Jammer and Notso backed up Avid. Owl, Brother, and Boaster complained about the racket, and the whole noise was too much, and the calming was too little,

too late. Peter woke with a start, the Lost Boys having interrupted quite a lovely dream.

He was furious, and on his feet in an instant. His dagger flew into his hand and he let out an angry shout. Mary smartly rolled off the bed, shaking her head, and went to go find breakfast.

“WHAT?” Peter shouted at the squabbling boys.

“No one ever said you got to sleep next to Queen Marilu!” Avid shouted back, fists clenched at his sides. He was really more jealous that Mary and Peter were such good friends than of the sleeping arrangements, but he and Peter had a lot in common when it came to how boys were and were not supposed to act.

Peter narrowed his eyes, but before he could speak, Giant did. The youngest Lost Boy was also the nicest of the lot. “So?” he asked, hands on his hips in a very Peter-ly fashion. “Why would anyone with a nose wanna sleep near you?”

Giggles went around the circle of Boys. Even Jammer added, “You do smell funny.”

The giggles turned into chuckles, and the chuckles into laughter. Avid, always a little serious, never took teasing well, and he started to cry. Mary hated hearing Avid cry, it was a pitiful sound, and so she took the Neverfruit she was eating for breakfast from her mouth and plugged up Avid’s with it.

“Let’s go swim in the lagoon,” she said.

The Lost Boys cheered and forgot breakfast. Everyone but Peter and Avid followed Mary out of the tree house and down to

the lagoon. Even Peter caught up later, but Avid refused to go and have fun with everyone.

Peter was still angry about being woken up, but he had sense enough to remember a warning, and he cared for his Lost Boys. He was still captain, after all, so he used the warning he remembered, and said to Avid. "You shouldn't be too stodgy and nitpicky in Neverland. Come swimming."

Avid folded arms resolutely and sat on the floor of the tree house. Peter waited for Avid to come along, but when the other boy seemed not to want to, Peter shrugged and flew out the window. Avid had no idea what stodgy meant, and Peter had not remembered enough of the warning to tell Avid why. After Peter had gone, Avid changed his mind, and grudgingly went to follow the group down to the lagoon, but he lost his way, and wandered into the dark of the forest.

Eventually what Avid *did* find was his way clean out of Neverland and into some other story. Wherever he ended up, that was the end of Avid, the seventh of Peter's nine new Lost Boys.

When the others returned from swimming, laughing and soggy, he was gone. Peter had an immediate answer for that. "He was stolen away and killed by the bandits!" Peter announced. "We must declare war!"

So the group of soggy children turned right back around and trekked back down to the beach towards the cave of the bandits. Peter crowed loudly, and when the hounds and the sentry responded, he kicked sand in the hounds' eyes and placed his hands on his hips.

“I declare war!” Peter shouted. The Lost Boys were in a ring around him, and they all cheered. The hounds hesitated a moment, and the sentry just blinked.

Mary and Tinkerbelle were watching this from a branch of a nearby tree. “Bad enough,” Mary said to Tink, “the hounds know Peter and my scent. Now they know the Lost Boys’ too.” Her mind wondered if they would be followed back to the clearing in the tree house, but this she did not say aloud to Tink.

Tink nodded in agreement and jingled something that Mary thought was, “Rain is right.” She deciphered that meant something closer to, ‘Right as rain,’ and watched as the boys trekked off into the junglewood towards the tree house again, cheering and shouting excitedly.

Mary watched absently, Tinkerbelle fluttering at her shoulder, and the two girls shook their heads in disapproval. “Why, aren’t you going to get ready?” Peter asked, popping out from behind a tree at her.

“I don’t particularly want to go to war,” Mary said. Fighting was all right, adventuring was wonderful, but when Mary had heard Peter say the word ‘war’, her thoughts had cleared, and the entire trek back to the beach had been a long, unhappy moment of the clarity of her thought burning the haze away from her memories.

When Peter asked his question, Mary was seized with the reason she still had the black dress, and her eyes brimmed with tears that she refused to let fall. “Just don’t make me cry over you too, Peter!” she shouted at him.

Peter was puzzled, but even more so when she hopped off the branch and flew off. He looked at Tinkerbelle, but the little

fairy shrugged and zipped off after the Lost Boys. Peter always led wars in Neverland, and he always won, so he could not figure out what she meant by her statement. He was the best captain that the island knew of, and the best always came in first.

“Where will you be when we’re done?” Peter called after her.

“Just come looking,” Mary’s voice echoed softly to him on the breeze, though he did not see her turn. She headed straight for her secret glade and hid behind the roaring waterfall, trying to sort out what had made her so upset.

The Lost Boys sang silly songs and made leather armor from the extra skin of the animals they had hunted to prove themselves brave enough to play with Peter. Even little Giant had tiger striped leather armor waiting for morning when the Boys all managed to get to bed that evening.

Unfortunately for the Lost Boys, as Mary suspected, Black Jack’s hounds followed them to the glade of the tree house that night, and at midnight, the bandits all climbed trees and scouted around for the children. Even in the darkness a house as fine as the tree house was easy to see, but the bandits saw nothing. A little boy is lighter than a man, and so can climb higher up a tree, and the Lost Boys all swung across to the tree house from the youngest, highest branches that made up the canopy.

The poor limbs of the trees could barely hold their weight.

Fortunately for the Boys, Mary decided to come home and check on them all. When she saw the bandits looking out of the branches for children, an instant before they saw her, she zipped up into the highest leaves of the canopy. The hounds were being

sternly berated by Black Jack for failing their master, and so they did not notice her.

She watched with quiet eyes until she knew where all the bandits were in the darkness, and then she let out a very good impression of Peter's crow. It would never have fooled Tinkerbelle or the Lost Boys, but the bandits were convinced easily enough. As a matter of fact, the Lost Boys all slept right through it, thinking it was a loud Neverbird, but Tinkerbelle woke with a start, and zipped over to wake Peter.

Black Jack and his bandits were confused. Mary crowed again, as loudly and convincingly as she could, and took off noisily through the leaves of the trees. After a moment of confusion, Black Jack bellowed for the entire company of bandits to give chase, and the cursing men slid down their trees and did as they were ordered to do.

Peter watched all this from the window of the tree house, and grabbed his sword before he flew out the window after Mary and the bandits. "Bandits aren't very nice," he remarked to Tink as they gave chase to the chasing party.

In order to confuse the hounds further, and because she and Peter had several long conversations on the theory of bandit fighting, she lead the troop of them through all the places the Lost Boys generally went in a day, her final destination the mountains where they all went to hunt furs for the ever-arriving winter.

Seasons in Neverland, one must understand, pass much more quickly than those we are used to outside of our dreams. It may be winter in the morning and summer by noon, or Fall at noon and Spring by evening, with only a short cold snap around naptime to encourage the eyes to shut. Dreams lack the solid

tedium of daily life, and so dreamlands like Neverland can bend the rules to the point of inconsistency. Sometimes the seasons followed no pattern. If the children were playing and the Summer began to turn to Fall, and they pouted and protested, sometimes Summer would continue for a long while, for periods of hours and days that cannot be recorded. And after the period of Summer, it could once again turn Spring, and the rain would fall like a watering can and then there would be Summer once more, hot and sunny as though it never left them.

But always somewhere on the dream island the seasons would lurk about, when the children were not playing in them, like cats hiding under furniture, just waiting to sneak up on them and pounce at their ankles. Winter, for instance, was primarily seen prowling about the Nevermountain, snowing so that the peak gleamed with white when the sun hit it. Spring seemed to hang generally over the dragon's slumbering scaly body, rain falling on the reptilian beast's hide and casting sinister shadows about the smoke that trailed upwards from its nose. Meanwhile Fall seemed intent on the beach where the Bandits and Pirates caused most of their trouble, and Summer followed the children around like a faithful puppy. Still, the Lost Boys and Marilu, as Peter instructed them, had to have things to put on when the Winter decided to pad its way down off the mountain and interrupt things. 'Just in case,' Peter would say, though he never could say in case of what.

When the chasing bandits started to climb the small hills at the base of the mountain, Peter flew high into the obliging clouds and up to wait near the cave where the bears liked to spend most of their time hibernating. Mary had much the same idea as Peter, and she nearly flew right into him, and almost gave a shout of surprise.

Peter lifted a finger to his lips and offered her a smile, motioning her to duck down and hide with him. The two children crouched behind the rocks at the top of the cave entrance. Thus hid, they both waited until the bandits followed them out, huffing and puffing from the steep climb. Peter threw his voice so it sounded as though he was laughing at them from inside the cave.

Black Jack came last, charging up the rocky slope in a swirl of black fabric that stood out against the blue-white snow, and loudly ordered his men, "Get after that boy now!"

The bandits complied readily enough, drawing swords and pistols and heading into the cave where Peter's laughter was coming from.

Had it not been winter on the mountain, the encounter with the cave might have gone quite differently. Bears do not lightly wake from hibernation, nighttime was especially wintry on the mountain, and so the bears always slept much more soundly, the nighttime feeling like a longer dream to the Neverbears, when truly it was a few hours of hibernation they were getting every night, but however a bear dreams, they get very angry when they are woken up.

When his bandits appeared to be taking too long finding a young boy, Black Jack grew impatient, and whistled for the hounds to follow them inside the cave. The beasts went in gladly, a skip to their massive paws, and a contentedly vicious snarl in their throats.

It was not long before the hounds bolted out of the cave, yipping in fear, the bandits nearly running on their tails, and what followed them was a loud growl that sounded like a roar from the biggest lion in the darkest of nightmares. The maker of the noise, a beast that followed its sound out of the cavern, was the biggest

of the black grizzlies that inhabited the mountain, and the most annoyed at being woken up. She, because she it was, came charging out of the cave with an angry snarl vibrating the lush black fur of her coat, swiping at the bandits within reach and standing up to her full height.

Widow, the great black grizzly whose name had been dubbed by Peter for watching two of her mates killed for pirate winter-wear, was the bear captain. In Neverland, there were all sorts of captains, some of them did not even know it, and Widow, the nine foot black grizzly, was one of them. She was a veteran of too many hunting parties, considered among the animals and especially the bears to be assassination attempts, to count, and had only one eye left, but a keener nose than any hound anyone had ever imagined into existence. She spread her large arms and unfurled her dark, deadly claws against the white snowy night.

Peter and the Lost Boys never hunted bears. They were too heavy to really kill and make use of, but it was good sport to try and wrestle one, just for practice. Mary's first successful hunt in Neverland had actually been a lion, which she had considered easy after Peter had forced her to wrestle with a bear cub. There was a casual truce between the children and the bears, and so though Widow's keen nose could smell the hiding children, she ignored them. She let out a roar and rushed towards Black Jack.

Their captain's roar roused the other bears, and soon the Bandits were beating an even hastier retreat farther away than the safety of their captain's back. "Cowards! Traitors! Dogs!" Jack cursed them, but he made no move to stop them, and he and the hounds joined in the swift descent down the slippery, snow-covered path.

Once they had gone, Peter stood and applauded Widow and the other bears as they stretched and yawned. Mary almost

swore that Widow winked at Peter as she and the others lumbered back in towards the cave to their hibernation, and let out a relieved little chuckle, relaxing finally after her midnight chase through the junglewood with the bandits.

Peter turned on her once the bears had all gotten into their cave, snowflakes catching in his wild hair. "What was that all about? Leading the bandits to us in the middle of the night?"

"The hounds did that," Mary replied, folding her arms on her chest. "I told you they would... you never listen. I came back and found them in the clearing and lead them away... I didn't want you all slaughtered in your sleep. They can follow scents, you know. Just as easily as any trained dog... only they're better at it. This is all that the hounds do, Peter... they hunt people, even the Lost Boys and us. It's why Black Jack keeps them around."

"Hmm," Peter said, pacing on the snowy hill and thinking, once Mary explained all the way through how the hounds had made their way towards the Two-P-Tree. The gears of his head seemed to be turning, as Mary watched him pace, thinking about the hounds chasing scents well. He thought for a long while, so long that Mary curled up and went to sleep, huddled and shivering against the cold of the snowy mountain.

Peter had to rouse her when he came up with his thought.

"So?" Mary asked with a yawn.

"We will turn the hounds on the bandits!" Peter announced proudly.

"How do you propose we do that, Peter?" Mary asked, stretching and brushing snow off her arms and legs. It was cold, and she was shivering so badly that her skin seemed to be a little

blue. She rubbed at her arms to try and get warm, and the snowfall lessened obligingly, as though Neverland had noticed she was cold. She patted the ground thankfully, but she really just wanted to go back to the tree house and sleep. It was late, she was cold and tired and worn out. "The bandits don't smell like us and the hounds won't turn on their masters."

Peter's eyes twinkled in the gray darkness of the snowy evening.

"Peter," Mary said in an honest voice that was just shy of whining, "I'm tired and cold, can we go home now so I can get some sleep?"

Peter started to protest, to get angry that she should want something like sleep when he had adventuring and wars to talk about, but something of the fight that had driven Mary away lingered in the shadowy corners of his cobweb-covered memory, and so he tucked away his sword and offered her a hand. Together, the two of them flew up into the chilly clouds and made their way back to the tree house, where they found Tink had returned without them to look after the Lost Boys. Mary grabbed the blanket on the large bed she shared with Peter and curled up on it and promptly fell fast asleep.

Nine: Avid's War

The Lost Boys were disappointed at missing such a grand adventure, but Peter hushed them at once when they protested the next morning, and herded them out of the tree house with their weapons and their armor, so that Mary could rest more. And then, with shining eyes and wild hair, Peter explained his plan. The Lost Boys were enthusiastic, and they all huddled around their captain, and between them all, they ironed out how they would fool the hounds.

The Lost Boys collected what they needed for their plan, which was fairly simple, tiptoeing around the tree house admirably to keep from disturbing the still sleeping Queen Marilu. She was sleeping so soundly, however, that even when Giant dropped her shield right next to the bed, she did not rouse from her slumber, or even make a noise or turn over. When they all reported back to the clearing below the tree house, in the early morning shade of

the Two-P-Tree, Peter ordered them sternly, "Form a straight line! Stand up straight and tall!"

The Boys, all of them shorter than tall, did their best, and puffed out their chests to make themselves feel better. "Chins high, shoulders back!" Peter bellowed. This was one of his favorite parts of playing captain with his Lost Boys.

"Sir!" the Boys all chorused in response.

"Today, Boys," Peter said in a mischievous voice, "we're marching to war to avenge dear, poor Avid." He was showing a surprisingly apt memory this morning, the Lost Boys noticed. Half the time he could not, or simply did not bother to remember their names, and those who were gone usually they left Peter's thoughts quickly. "Now give a holler loud enough to scare the bandits in their cave!"

The Boys all obliged, and let out young shrieks of terror and doom. The sentry for the bandits, who lounged in the midday sun on the beach, as it was summer at that moment, saw a flock of Neverbirds, in brilliant colors, alight from the trees deep within the junglewood. He did not think much on it, and was not particularly scared by the Neverbirds. He could not hear the shouting.

"Tink!" Peter called, looking around for his fairy. She had been curiously absent-minded recently. He sounded the serious captain in that moment, and so when Tinkerbell flew down to him, she clicked her tiny heels, making the sound of jingling bells, and offered up a tiny, twinkling salute. "You, Tinkerbell," Peter continued, sounding very official, "are to watch over Marilu until she wakes up."

Tink made a rude face.

“Then you can join us, if you like,” Peter said, mollifying her.

Tink continued to protest for a longer moment than was usual with fairies, but she soon gave up and shrugged, saluting again and zipping off towards the tree house. Her two children were just as important to her. And spending the rest of the late morning with a slumbering Mary would give her time to herself.

“Now, Lost Boys,” Peter said with a distinct twinkle in his eye, “we go to war.”

The Lost Boys gave a loud hurrah and lifted their supplies, swords and armor, and headed into the junglewood.

The plan was a simple one, but cunning. Peter would lead the hounds on a long journey through the junglewood, past all the places the children liked to play, and even their favorite spots to break and eat. The Lost Boys, dressed as the various animal cubs in the armored skins that they wore, would wait for the Bandit sentry to call on human reinforcements. For this reason, as well as pride, Peter wore no armor and was as clean as he ever got.

To the hounds, Peter would smell of all the things he ever smelled of – the scent of the back of the wind’s neck, the youngest of the twinkling stars in the sky, and, of course, adventure.

The Lost Boys, however, had to scrub themselves clean as a whistle before slathering themselves in mud so they would smell as little as possible like themselves. Peter flew in lazy circles over the pool at the bottom of the waterfall as the boys scrubbed themselves clean, splashing and laughing with one another. Then the boys climbed out helped one another to rub mud all over

themselves before strapping into the animal skins. When they were done, there were six animal cubs where the Lost Boys had been, all dirty and indiscernible from one another underneath their masks and skins. Then, carefully, with sticks, they lifted the leaf wrapped strips of their own bedding, and headed off after Peter towards the bandits' cave.

Finally the plan was ready and the boys set off through the junglewood, Peter flying high overhead as he made his approach to the beach. He swooped down over the beach, emitting a loud crow, the bandit sentry fired a shot at him that missed, and as he moved to reload his pistol, Peter landed before him on the sand.

“BOO!” Peter shouted.

The bandit jumped, dropping his pistol while still fumbling with the powder he was trying to load into it with shaking hands. He fumbled for his sword.

Peter flew forward, drawing his own sword and stopping nose to nose with the bandit. The man's back was against the rock next to the cave entrance. “Too slow,” Peter laughed, “Old man!”

The bandit winced, closing his eyes, “So just get it over with,” he said in a resigned voice.

Peter rolled his eyes and stepped back, kicking aside the fallen pistol, “Draw your sword,” he said.

As Peter expected, the cowardly bandit turned and fled into the cave rather than facing him with his sword, given the opportunity of enough space to move. Screaming for the other bandits, the sentry loosed the hounds as he went deeper into the caves. The dark beasts tore out of the cave entrance where they

were kept close to the surface, and after Peter, who took off running down the beach.

Peter was not as fast at running as he was at flying, but the hounds were not nearly as fast as him. The whole group of them ran right past the hidden Lost Boys, and the hounds didn't notice in the least. Once Peter had lead the great slobbering beasts out of earshot, the Lost Boys crept out of the bushes they were hiding in, moving on all fours to sit themselves in a semicircle around the cave entrance. All the while they growled and snarled and made dangerous animal noises low in their throats until at last Black Jack and his men came running out onto the sand.

At the sight of the Lost Boy-beasts, there was much complaining from the bandits. "None a'this again, Jack!" and "M'not fightin' no more a'them animals!" were among the shouts from Black Jack's men.

Jack cast a glare around the company of them, and they all fell silent. He moved towards Mostly-wolf, and the growling increased all around the half-circle of lost boy-beasts. Jack paused, and Mostly-wolf gave a howl. The other boy-beasts responded in their own animal noises and the group of them rushed forward, swords coming from under their animal skin disguises.

It was immediately obvious that the boys were just as human as the bandits, but the bandits were more superstitious and skeptical than pirates. So it was up to Black Jack himself to begin the battle, and he did so with a loud curse that shall not be repeated here, and a shot of his pistol that shocked his stunned men into moving.

Mostly answered the screaming of the pistol shot that he dodged with a loud cry of, "For Avid!"

Black Jack bellowed for his men to fight, bellowing, "If you can't even fight children, you're no men of mine! You can go to Bart on his floating log!"

You must understand the severity of Jack's threat. Pirates and bandits, in Neverland, were the worst of enemies. So great was the rivalry betwixt them that the animosity between them was almost greater than that of either group with Peter and his Lost Boys.

Slowly the pride of Black Jack's men, or what existed in the bandits close enough to be called such a thing, was hurt. The bandits fought back in earnest. Luckily for the bandits' lapse in courage, the Lost Boys were not fighting only to do away with their enemies. The plan was more devious than that. But alas, Giant got a cut, a deep mark across his chest that rent his armor deeply. It was dealt fairly, even for a bandit, and the small boy would have been too wounded to fight more, if at that moment, from deep within the forest, Peter had not crowed.

Now, Peter did not know about Giant's wound, but he did know that even the strongest and fastest hound would get tired, and the dogs could not catch him at full strength running on two feet. When he saw the animals tiring, he let out a crow and sprang into the air, flying quickly through the leaves of the junglewood and down to the battle at the beach.

When the Lost Boys saw him, they let out a cheer, pushing Giant to the back, and forced themselves forward towards the bandits. Their targets were chosen. Strips of bedding were placed in pockets and tucked in belts, and then, according to plan, the boys pretended to quail in the face of their foes.

It should be said, however, that Giant's call to Peter was quite sincere. "Peter!" he cried, "we need to pull back!" But one

cannot truly blame the young boy, the smallest of them all. He was bleeding, and there was so much less blood for him to lose than the others.

As soon as he had reached the beach, Peter had set to dueling with Black Jack, but when he heard these words from Giant, he spared a glance to the youngest of his Lost Boys and let out a sigh. Black Jack took the opportunity of his distraction to pull a pistol and fire it, but Peter dodged the bullet with a neat little flip.

“Fine!” Peter called out to the boys, “Retreat!”

Poor Peter. He did hate nothing so much as retreating. Perhaps the only person who hated it more than Peter was Jack. He lunged and grabbed Peter by the ankle just as the boy was about to fly higher to lead the retreat. “Running away again, Pan?” he hissed, tossing Peter heavily to the sand.

“It’s not running away if I *fly*!” Peter crowed back proudly, rolling out of the way of a strike from Black Jack’s sword, and leapt right off his back into the air. The Lost Boys withdrew quietly into the brush. The bandits were too enthralled by the duel between the two captains to really notice that their own opponents were deserting them.

Peter did not fly away immediately. He continued to duel with Jack as he watched the Lost Boys slink away from the corner of his eye. “What’s your problem?” he asked.

“My problem?” Black Jack retorted, his eyes flashing dark and menacing. “You mean you haven’t guessed *Peter*?” Black Jack spit the name from his lips like the vilest of all horrible curses. His eyes grew blacker and he gritted his teeth as Peter often did. “The

great *Peter Pan* who runs from everything! If I were as cowardly as you, Pan, I wouldn't get up in the morning!"

Peter growled in response. "A coward is a grown man hiding behind guns and dogs!" he hissed back, "Buried in caves and surrounded by hordes of bandits." His feet touched the sand and his sword flashed. Peter pressed himself forward, leaning on an advantage brought by his superior knowledge of swordplay.

Black Jack angrily hurled his pistol to the sand and drew a second sword from the hands of his waiting men.

"Right, and that's fair!" Peter rolled his eyes, jumping into the air and flying high out of reach with a crow.

Somewhere in the distance, the hounds let out an answering howl, rushing back to their master and the battle as quickly as their weary bodies would move. Black Jack scowled and kicked his pistol again. The gun went off, hitting one of his men in the foot, and the bandits all retreated to the safety of the cave. Their master's dark mood meant their lives were less valuable than usual, and with the returning calls of the hounds, they felt uneasy.

Alone, Black Jack met the hounds, who ran up and jumped at his knees. He kneeled thoughtlessly, and the hounds were less ferocious and more dog when he did such things, and they licked at his face happily. He petted their dark fur and his tortured expression calmed.

Ten: Peace Offering

During Peter's war, Mary had slept, woken, and worked diligently on fixing Peter's broken pipes. It had taken her all afternoon, but she had done it before Peter lead the muddy Lost Boys back home in a parade through the jungleground. She heard them coming and flew down out of the tree house. Peter crowed proudly, landing on a tree branch, and the Lost Boys rushed forwards excitedly, filled with stories about the battle.

It was Mostly, who had been helping Giant walk back, who arrived after the parade and called attention to the brave wounded boy's condition. Tinkerbelle gasped and zipped off after the fairy doctor, and Mary quieted Mostly with, "The fairies will take care of him." She then turned to look up at Peter as he had intended by landing on the branch, and asked, "How was it, Peter?"

"Black Jack is a vile fiend," he said with a shrug, "and his men will desert him when the hounds turn on them."

This elicited a cheer from the Lost Boys.

“How did you manage that?” Mary asked.

Proudly, Peter sunk the point of his sword into the ground and clapped his hands, calling for a fire and a chair for the Queen. Mary, who had been growing quite tired of her nickname by now, suddenly did not mind it so much anymore, and cheered right along with the Lost Boys to hear Peter’s story.

Mostly carried the chair forward with some help from Jammer, and the other boys went to making a fire. During the preparations, Peter flew off about some personal business of his own, and returned once everything was ready. As his dirty feet touched the clearing, he graciously extended a hand for Mary, and made quite a show of leading her to her throne. After she was seated, the Lost Boys scrambled quickly to take their places. To the on-looking Indian scout, it appeared that Mary was seated in the midst of man, or rather, boy-beasts that had been charmed by Peter Pan. Wanting nothing whatsoever to do with magic of that sort, the scout fled into the thick of the junglewood, leaving the children in peace for the evening. That was very lucky for them, because when Peter told a story, everyone paid attention. He did not often tell stories himself. Peter was much more often the subject of a story than its teller, but when he did choose to tell a story, it was always a fantastic tale. The Lost Boys, who had been present at most of the events, oftentimes could rarely place the events that happened from their memories in the story that Peter made of them.

Even Mary’s eyes were glued to Peter as he danced through the trip in the jungle, pantomiming on the far side of the fire. The Lost Boys, who had been fighting the bandits at the time, listened with rapt attention, as though they had not been present at all.

They cheered at the part when story-Peter returned to find them fighting the Bandits on the beach, for in Peter's version of the story you have already heard, the armor the Lost Boys wore turned them into the animals they had taken it from, and the bandits cowered before their foes.

At the appropriate moment, with a loud crow from Peter that announced their retreat, the story sighed itself to an end, and Mary asked, "What of the bandits, Peter?"

Peter cleared his throat and said proudly, "We have made them smell like us. When the hounds make their weary way back to the cave, it will be far too dark to see, and they will smell Lost Boys and attack the sleeping bandits."

The Lost Boys all clapped at the genius of Peter's plan, but Mary's eyes looked doubtful. Tinkerbell flew in and spoke into Peter's ear, loud enough for Mary and the Lost Boys to hear the twinkling of bells, faintly.

To Mary, it slowly began to sound like a woman whispering, and she could almost make out the words, but only just. Her mother had always been careful of speaking near her because she had such good hearing.

"What is it, Peter?" Mostly asked for the anxious boys.

"Giant is sleepy," Peter announced. "Everyone follow me and we'll bring him back to the tree house."

The Lost Boys rose and Peter extended a hand for Mary. They all went together to the old Fairy Tree to retrieve Giant, and Peter carried the young boy on his own back up to the tree house. The Lost Boys were all quite exhausted, but too excited to sleep. Peter's story had included how the bandit's battle with the hounds

would sound, claiming that the children would all be able to hear the braying and cursing through the junglewood, despite the distance it was to the beach.

Giant was the only one asleep before the moon came up over the trees to smile at them, but Mary went about her evening ritual anyway. First she shook the leaves from the Wendy-bed, and then she undid the braid in her hair, and brushed out her dark locks, singing softly as she worked.

Peter sighed. He wished he had something to accompany her with, and then he remembered his pipes! He reached for them, only to find them missing. He sighed again, but this time the Lost Boys echoed it. Woven into Mary's song was a soft, childish sort of lullaby, and the boys, who may or may not have ever heard one from their mothers, were highly susceptible to it. A lullaby is a little of magic that all mothers know, if they have heard one before, and all children fall pray to, especially if they have not.

"You sing pretty," Peter offered awkwardly from his perch in the window. He was watching the moon, and having remembered for the moment their early argument over the song, felt rather as though he had been exceptionally mean.

Hair down around her shoulders, Mary reached to her belt to finger the fixed pipes with a yawn. "I thought you didn't like my singing."

"I..." Peter frowned. He knew he was dangerously close to apologizing, which was something he never did.

"Catch," Mary said, tossing the pipes in his direction.

Turning, Peter caught them in his lap. He stared at them for a moment, and then looked up at Mary, only to find she was laying down in bed, just as all the dozing Lost Boys were around their beds in the little tree house. "Thank you," Peter said softly.

"I did break them, after all," Mary replied, eyes still closed.

A smile tickled Peter's lips as he looked at Mary, lying and pretending to sleep. Her face was a little dirty, but still pretty, and her dark hair curled on the sheets the same way the mermaids' hair did in the water, and how Tiger Lily's did when she ran.

Beautiful.

Peter glanced over his shoulder at the moon and hopped down, walking over to climb into bed. He put his arm around Mary's waist, like usual, only this time he felt shy about it for some reason.

Eleven: The Dragon

So late that it was early in the morning, the Lost Boys were awoken by the sounds of a scuffle. Hounds howled and bandits cursed, but it was not coming from the cave on the shore. It was coming from directly beneath them in the junglewood.

All the Boys, except for Giant who had been doused with a fairy lullaby, woke up, sitting stiffly in their beds. A fairy lullaby is ten times stronger than a mother's; even Peter fell asleep to them, usually. Mother, it seemed, had not been taught for ages the proper way to put a child to bed, and so children were much more susceptible to the things that ought to be done to get a child to sleep. Bedtime stories, or any stories after dark, really, and lullabies, though all they ever got was Mary's singing, which always swooned them to sleep and good dreams, were therefore much more potent than to the nine Lost Boys of this story than they may have been to any set of prior Lost Boys.

The Lost Boys had expected the hounds to attack the bandits in the cave, and were so surprised that they all rushed to the little window to see what was happening below. It was quite a battle. The bandits were running in circles around the trees, half-dressed and swatting behind them at the barking beasts that were chasing them.

Peter woke too, but only because the rush of Lost Boys to one side of the tree house had tipped the entire little wooden house dangerously on one end. Sliding out of bed, nearly, is what woke Peter. Mary did slide out of bed, and fell on the floor and let out quite a noise as she hit.

Just as she started to slide down towards the curious Lost Boys, Peter reached down and grabbed her by the ankle. "Don't fly," he said, shifting his weight carefully.

Looking around, Mary's sleepy mind realized what was happening, the weight of the Lost Boys piled to one end of the tree house was about to tip the little thing from its perch. She nodded to Peter, she also saw the only balancing point was the sleeping form of Giant across from the two of them in his hanging bed on the far wall.

Climbing up the bed, she followed Peter carefully towards that end of the tree house, and slowly it began to level out.

Until Mostly bounced on his heels in excitement, and the whole house flounced in the Two-P-Tree, pitching dangerously. It balanced for a moment on the corner, and then turned entirely on end, dumping seven Lost Boys end over end out the window. Mostly managed to redeem himself by grabbing hold of the window ledge, and the other boys grabbed onto one another,

Puddle clinging tightly to Mostly's legs, Jammer to Puddle's legs, Owl to Jammer's legs, and so on.

Giant was still secure, and Mary and Peter hovered carefully inside the upper part of the on-ended little house. If either bandits or hounds had looked up, they would have seen a curious sight. Seven of the lost boys were hanging precariously out of the window by the strength of Mostly's grip, feet dangling down just above the bandit's heads.

"Push against the back of the house, otherwise the house will fall out of the tree," Peter said, "I'll get the Lost Boys."

Mary nodded, fearful, but in agreement with Peter's solution. She waited for Peter's signal to push. Peter caught Mostly's arms as he started to let go, and Mary pushed slowly on the back wall as he dragged the boys back into the tree house, one by one. Young muscles strained, and each Lost Boy tugged inside helped to pull the rest in after him.

Once most of the Lost Boys were inside, Peter flew up to help Mary, and the two of them held the house until all seven of the dangling boys were in and standing on the wall that held the window.

"Lay down against the floor," Peter said. Once the boys were in position, he and Mary gave a great heave that sent the house tipping back over into place on its branches.

"In the morning we should tie the tree house to the tree," Mary said, checking on Giant in his hanging bed. When she saw that he was fine, she let out a yawn and crawled right back into bed and went to sleep.

Peter shrugged and then turned with his hands on his hips to regard the Lost Boys. "What was all that about?" he asked.

"The hounds and the bandits are fighting down below," Boaster chimed in, "We all just wanted to see."

"But I already told you what happened," Peter said in a cross voice.

"Yeah, but we wanted to *see* it," Puddles replied. "None of us have an imagination as good as yours, Peter."

Owl and Mostly and Brother and Jammer and Puddle and Notso and Boaster all nodded. Peter rolled his eyes, "Back to bed!" he ordered sternly.

The Lost Boys, except for Giant who was still sound asleep, moved quickly to their beds, crawling into the piles of leaves and pulling animal skins and blankets over top of themselves. Peter was no longer in the mood to sleep, but he flopped down on the Wendy-bed next to Mary and took out his newly returned pipes and began to play quietly.

Beneath the tree house, the bodies of what hounds the bandits had killed and what bandits the hounds had killed lay still as the night lingered on, until the scent of the blood drew the largest carnivore on Neverland from its stony perch. Great leathery wings flapped and carried the giant beast from the rocky side of the island that looked like an abandoned castle.

As the dragon descended from flight, its large wings swept powerful winds through the junglewood, brushing leaves and branches aside as the beast descended to its feast in the clearing of the Two-P-Tree. Somehow, either the dragon got smaller, the

clearing got bigger, or Neverland just stretched a little fib to let the dragon fit in the clearing and have its fill.

For the second time before the sun rose, the tree house moving startled Peter. Angrily he leapt to his feet, but his bright eyes found that the Lost Boys were all clinging to the floor, the walls, or their beds, whatever seemed safest to them. Mary sat up in the Wendy-bed and watched as Peter flew to the window.

When he turned back to look in her direction, his eyes were sparkling with an adventure he had almost forgot was waiting for him. His hair tousled in the wind, and he quickly grabbed his shield and sword, diving out through the window.

“The dragon,” Mary breathed.

The startled Lost Boys turned their attention to the little window, and they could see their captain, their Peter, raising a sword against the dragon, and then a burst of flame came blasting towards them. Everyone dove to the floor, the boys narrowly missing being burned by the fire. As it was, the ends of Mary’s loose hair were singed.

Immediately afterwards, Mary got to her feet, flying for her shield and bows and arrows, and headed out after Peter.

Peter was flying in swift circles around the dragon, confusing it. The dizzy beast tried, continually to blast him with flames, but kept missing.

When Mary came out of the tree house, the dragon’s nostrils flared and it turned to look at her. Peter’s first thought was that the dark beast would somehow capture Mary. And because Peter imagined it, the dragon reached out and plucked Mary from the sky, weapons and all.

“Mary NO!” Peter cried.

The dragon turned to Peter, its maw opening into a toothy smile, and puffed smoke haughtily from its nostrils. Flapping massive wings the beast lifted from the small clearing that seemed somehow to fit it just barely, and flew off back in the direction of its rocky ruins.

Whereas the early pitching of the tree house had not disturbed her slumber, the fire from the dragon certainly had woken Tinkerbelle. She zipped out of her little hideaway apartment in the tree house and up to Peter, full of questions about the Lost Boys and the dragon and Mary. Peter ignored her, growling loudly as he flew back into the tree house where the Lost Boys were putting out the fire that had caught from the dragon’s breath, beating leaf beds and walls with blankets.

“Line up!” Peter said.

The Lost Boys, including Giant, made a line down the middle of the tree house. Peter looked up and down the line of them, seeing fear in their eyes brought on by the dragon’s fire-breath. The dragon was unlike any of the other Neverbeasts they knew of, or even that Peter had dealt with. Smudges of dirt and soot were mixed with scared on the Lost Boy’s skin.

Even though he could not smell the fear over the smoke in the smoldering tree house, Peter knew that the boys were far too scared to tackle a dragon with him. And he did not think his ground-bound Lost Boys would do well against the dragon.

So Peter made a decision.

“Stay here,” Peter said, tightening his little hand into a fist.
“I’m going to bring Queen Marilu back.”

Twelve: The Knight and the Dragon

Dawn came at last, and spring along with it. Peter watched the whole brilliance of the sunrise, determination in the set of his lips as the clouds lightened and the stars twinkled their goodnights to one another as they prepared to sleep for the day.

Mostly coughed to get Peter's attention, and when his captain turned, Mostly offered up Peter's shield to him. Taking it wordlessly, Peter slid the shield over his arm and tightened the straps until it did not slide around when he flexed his arm. He took the sword that Mostly offered him, and prepared to fly off after the dragon.

But then Giant came forward, offering up one of the Boy's leather helmets to him, and Peter allowed it to be put onto his head. Giant smiled, "This will keep you safe, Peter."

And then Owl stepped up, offering Peter his breastplate. Again with a nod, Peter allowed it to be fixed over his shoulders to hang down over his chest. And Brother and Boaster found arm guards. And all the Lost Boys crowded around the bravest of them all. Peter knew they were afraid, afraid for him no less, but paid no attention to their fear, instead concentrating on their well-wishes, and once the Lost Boys were making him uncomfortable with all of their attention, he flew up out of their midst and at once out the window.

Tinkerbelle zipped after Peter, and the two of them headed high into the clouds, out of sight of the junglewood and over the Nevermountain. The billowing smoke usually present over the ruins of the castle was absent, and as the two of them descended, Peter saw there were three white, horned horses approaching on the rocky slope. He also saw that the dragon was curled in on itself, hiding its snout from view.

Flying lower, Peter remembered what the horned horses were. Unicorns. As he descended, they slowed, and the lead animal turned to look at Peter.

“I’m going to save Marilu,” Peter said.

The largest unicorn tossed its head and reared, front legs lifting high into the air over Peter’s head. Peter smiled and nodded to the unicorn. He could understand it in the same way he could understand Tinkerbelle and the mermaids. The unicorn planted its strong legs down and knelt so that Peter could climb onto its back. He rode towards the dragon, unaware that he looked, decked in the armor of the Lost Boys and carrying a sword and shield, seated on the back of a bright white unicorn, like a wild knight off to save a damsel in distress.

Mary lay rigidly in the dragon's grip, almost afraid to move for fear of being crushed. The cave created by the dragon's hot, scaly body and its large, leathery wings was filling with smoke and tangy dragon's breath. She was starting to choke on the thick air, and her labored breathing turned to coughing.

How had she gotten herself into this mess? She wondered.

Finally even patient Mary could hold still no longer, and she squirmed in the dragon's grip. The small pouch of arrows strained and the pointy tips of the arrows broke through the bottom of the soft leather pouch, poking the dragon in the tender part of its tough dragon hand.

The scaly beast let out a roar of pain, dropping Mary to the damp rocks that made up the bottom of the castle ruins. She landed with a heavy thud, thankfully on a soft bit of dirt, and rolled behind one of the stone tower pieces. The dragon's great head flung itself backwards, wings spreading in anger, and fresh air rushed down into the canyon its curled body made.

The noise of the dragon's roaring alerted Peter, who had been hiding up the slope and looking for a way to sneak in. He watched her fall downwards from the dragon's grip, but could not quite see where. He leapt up from where he and the unicorns were hiding, and flew forward quickly, darting between the bottom of the dragon's left wing and its side.

The angry dragon swooped its head back down, snapping jaws after Peter's heels, but the dark beast was not as fast as the boy. Peter was fast enough to catch the winds on a clear day, but there was only so much room inside the curl of the dragon to fly in. Eventually Peter found Mary had fallen, at the same instant that the dragon's teeth caught hold of Peter's borrowed armor.

“MARY!” Peter called out as the dragon started to close its teeth around him, pressing the armor into his skin. The only response to his cry was Tinkerbelle flying swiftly at the dragon’s eyes. The dragon let go of Peter and snapped after the fairy.

“Thanks Tink!” Peter called, ripping the damaged armor off and flying down to Mary. He reached her quickly and gathered her up. She was heavier than usual, and her dark hair looked sticky in back, but he ignored it, and carried her and her broken weapons to where the unicorns were hiding.

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Mostly felt uneasy at being left behind, despite being scared. He knew what Avid would say, if he were not gone. Avid would say that it was hardly fair for Peter to have all the fun adventuring and leave them behind, but Mostly was more worried about Mary, and about Peter too.

Peter had not been gone very long before Mostly got up and announced that they could not be Peter’s Lost Boys if they were not along on this particular adventure. Eventually, the other boys all agreed, and gave a loud shout. Since they failed to learn to fly, Peter had never taught them to crow. Swords were collected and the eight of them swung to their trees and climbed down to the junglewood floor. They headed in the direction that Mostly thought the dragon would be in.

Their path took them past the Bandit’s Cave, but none of the boys were too worried about bandits, if they even thought about them. Most of them had perished earlier, beneath their dangling feet. But none of the Lost Boys were thinking about it, and so none of them were paying attention to the shadows of the

cave entrance, and so none of them saw the twinkling black eyes that watched them as they went.

Thirteen: An Almost Gallant Rescue

Fighting the dragon was easier for Tinkerbelle than it was for Peter. Faeries do not tire so quickly as boys, even very special boys as Peter Pan. Flying quickly from where he left Mary with the unicorns, Peter held his shield in front of himself protectively and flew towards the dragon, sword swinging as it would against any opponent.

The dragon retaliated against Peter's sword by swinging its great head and breathing jets of fire at the flying boy. Peter deflected them with his shield, but the metal soon became hot and he had to rid himself of it. He pulled at the straps and tore the metal from his arm, burning his hand in the process. Peter clenched his teeth against the pain and hurled the hot metal shield at one of the dragon's large eyes.

The great beast was so amused at the boy's trouble that it was too busy snickering to attack, or defend, for the Neverdragon was an unkind opponent his entire stay in Neverland. It did not pay attention to the shield that Peter threw, and the hot metal plunged into one of its large eyes. The dragon's head lashed backwards and fire jetted from the dragon's mouth, scorching the clouds overhead.

Peter crowed his success, in turn too distracted to see the swift strike of the dragons tail as it lashed out wildly.

The only thought he managed, as the force of the blow knocked him clear out of the sky and sent him tumbling into the Neversea, was that the scales of the dragon were surprisingly cool for something that breathed fire.

*

Fortune lead the Lost Boys to the cliffs at that moment, fortune and the brilliant flames overhead, and Peter's triumphant crowing. When Mostly saw the dragon looking for Mary, he ran ahead of the other boys to where the unicorns were, figuring that somehow they would have something to do with her.

Giant and Owl had to rush forward and grab him by the arms to keep him from running headfirst into the kicking hooves of the young colt.

"I want to help!" Mostly shouted at the colt. The white creature's nostrils flared challengingly, and Mostly cried out, "Marilu! Mary, wake up!"

But she did not move at all.

The angry dragon caught a whiff of the Lost Boys' and Mary's scent, and lunged its head towards the boulder behind which the unicorns were hiding, crashing it to the side with a sweep of its head. The Lost Boys all screamed, and the dragon paused, blinking its good eye.

The largest of the unicorns charged during the opening, spearing the dragon's neck with its horn. In response, the dragon swept a clawed hand at it, and as the large unicorn was injured, the other two rounded on the dragon in support.

Mostly looked frantically at the battle, the other Lost Boys too stunned to make any move until Mostly broke free of the paralyzed spell they were all in and darted forward after Mary's prone body. Owl followed, and the two of them picked up Mary. Mostly took hold of her shoulders and Owl her ankles, but the two of them alone were too nervous to carry her very far.

"Come on then!" Owl called out to the other boys.

Giant, Brother, Boaster, Notso, Jammer and Puddle all came forward, and the Lost Boys hefted Mary's body together, screaming loudly as they ran for the cover of the junglewood down the stony path. The dragon was too busy to notice, fighting the unicorns, and the unicorns were too busy with the dragon to care.

Their rescue was nowhere near as gallant as Peter's, but the Lost Boys could not fly, and so were at a supreme disadvantage when it came to the style of their rescue.

*

The cold water of the Neversea startled Peter back to consciousness just as his head dipped below the surface of the

water. The mermaids were waiting for him, having come up from their caves at the depths of the bay to investigate all the commotion. But that day they were not feeling very helpful. When Peter tried to swim for the surface, the mermaids dragged him back under. He tried again, and again the mermaids pulled him downwards, wrapping long flowing underwater tresses around his ankles. Looking up out of the water, Peter could see Tinkerbelle flitting back and forth worriedly.

Finally, as Peter's patience and lungs began to burn, he stopped bothering to swim and flew upwards through the water, dragging the attached mermaids clear out of the lagoon. He drew the dagger he always carried and bent double to cut himself free of hair wrapped around his ankles and still attached to the now screaming mermaids, dropping the water women back into the lagoon below.

Once free, Peter flew towards where he left the dragon, but all he found when he arrived was the wounded reptile heaving labored smoky breaths, and the forms of three fallen unicorns. Mary was nowhere, and a cluster of footprints leading down towards the beach was the only clue to where she might have gone. Tinkerbelle zipped back and forth in confusion

'Indians,' thought Peter, collecting his sword from where it had fallen on the rocks near the dragon and flying after the footprints.

*

The Lost Boys as a group were more than enough to carry Mary's heavy body fairly quickly down the path and away from the dragon. They knew where they were headed and jogged quickly for the junglewood and the singed Two-P-Tree. What the

boys did not expect was Black Jack coming towards them from the beach with two of his hounds limping obediently after him.

Mostly and Owl saw him first, and screamed. The dark hounds barked loudly in response, and there was such a racket that for a moment nothing at all happened. Then Black Jack fired a pistol shot into the air, and silenced them all. The Lost Boys had to choose between dropping Mary and drawing their swords, but did not have time to make a decision before Black Jack spoke.

“Give me the girl and no one gets hurt.”

At his sides, the hounds snarled to reinforce their master.

“No!” Mostly shouted, to which the other Lost Boys chorused after him, and the group of them backed up.

The hounds moved quickly, faster than the Lost Boys who were hindered by the rocky terrain and the burden of an unconscious young girl. The dark creatures darted forward, one on each side, and circled around behind the Lost Boys, snapping at their heels and trapping them in a very sticky situation.

Even snapping hounds and their foul, hot breath did not persuade the courageous Lost Boys to relinquish Mary. Peter had, indeed, chosen well in them, but the Lost Boys, still unwilling to drop their cargo, could not ignore the snapping jaws of the hounds, and so they inched slowly in the direction of Black Jack and his two drawn pistols. It was Owl, who carried Mary’s ankles, who drew nearest the bandit leader first, near enough to smell the stench of death and damp cave that hung about his black clothing, and he shut his eyes as he waited to be shot, or struck with the butt of one of the bandit’s pistols. But again all action on the path was stopped by a cacophony so loud that it stopped thought.

It was Peter, who let out an ear-splitting crow from overhead as he dove straight down at the group of them.

In response, Black Jack let out a terrifying roar, and in all the commotion, most of the Lost Boys let out a scream and let go of Mary finally, scattering to the sides and clutching their ears in a vain attempt to miss being skewered by their captain or bitten by the hounds, who were still advancing on them despite the noise.

Mostly, alone, held Mary by the shoulders as the hounds lunged forward and Peter dove out of the sky, and he fell to the ground with her, shielding her from attack. Owl gave another rallying shout, loud enough to reach the Lost Boys, and they all drew their swords and turned on the hounds, protecting Mary and Mostly.

Black Jack fired volley after volley of bullets at Peter, who swooped around him trying to get close enough to attack. The bandit's footing was precarious on the rocky path, and he could not seem to hit the flying boy. Peter was enjoying himself immensely. He found he was fast enough to dodge a shot from one of the pistols and dart in to tip Black Jack's hat from his head, or tug the tails of his long coat, or finally, and this was quite a feat, Peter tripped Black Jack on his own oversized boots.

When Black Jack fell to the ground, he landed just to the side of Mostly and Mary. Peter was laughing at his triumph and holding his stomach where he hovered overhead. Mostly just stared, wide-eyed at the dark bandit, and Black Jack aimed a pistol at his forehead.

The other Lost Boys were too busy chasing off the hounds, brandishing swords and following the two dogs back towards the dragon. Mostly Just Here froze, and he would not forgive himself for it until much, much later. Black Jack snatched Mary by the

hair and pulled her up off the ground, turning the pistol he had aimed at Mostly to her temple.

Peter stopped laughing.

“Not so funny *now*, is it **PAN**?” Black Jack taunted him. He hated to be laughed at. Long ago when he was a child, it had happened very often.

Something about young Jack... or rather, young James, as he was then. No child can tell what names growing up will bring. But something about young James had seemed altogether too nice for the other children. Too fine. Superior. And so to get back at him for this inborn better-ness, the other children had picked on Jack mercilessly.

Laughing still made the grown up Black Jack furious, though he may have even forgotten why. Neverland took longer to affect the minds of adults, but Black Jack had been in Neverland chasing Peter angrily since the days of Hook. And finally, after all that time, he had a way to strike at the boy he considered to be his mortal enemy.

“Let her go!” Peter demanded.

“Oh I don’t that sounds like something I’ll be doing at all, Pan.” Black Jack backed down the path, dragging Mary’s unresisting body with him. “If you want your precious girl back, you know where to find me.”

Peter started to fly after Black Jack, but the bandit took his pistol from her temple and aimed it straight at Peter’s flying head. He fired it.

Peter swooped, doing a backwards flip in mid-air, but by the time he recovered, Black Jack and Mary were gone.

Fourteen: Battle of the Brothers

Black Jack was very fortunate, as he made his escape towards the cave, that Blue Bart and his pirates knew nothing of the deaths of the other bandits and his hounds. The commotion with the dragon had roused the pirates from sleep, and the *Jolly Roger* sailed over to investigate, leaving the lagoon dark and empty of watching eyes as the last bandit dragged the girl's body back to his hideout.

Black Jack carried Mary all the way to the cages he kept prisoners in, and dumped her on the wet stone inside one. It was only then that he saw the blood on his jacket. For a moment he thought perhaps Pan had gotten him, but when he found that he was hale, he decided the blood must have come from Mary, and checked her over. It was he who found the wound on the back of her head from when the dragon had dropped her, and he scowled and proceeded to do something very un-bandit-like.

Jack brought water and bandages down from his own cave-chamber, and took care of Mary's injury. The decent man he had been long ago took charge of him in a flurry of memory, and Jack even thought to cover her with an almost clean blanket.

The scowling bandit in him contented himself with the notion that Peter would not fight if the girl died. He had no idea that Neverland itself would not stand for such a thing, or that once, a very, very long time ago, Jack had been quite fond of children.

Outside, the evening came to a close at the lagoon, the sun setting over the waters at last, and night fell. Peter and the Lost Boys were fighting pirates who had come ashore, and the battle was so involved that it took the length of the path and down to the beach before both sides were quite exhausted and just went home.

Peter was preoccupied, as he lead the way back, wondering what Black Jack could possibly want with Mary. The Lost Boys climbed wearily into the tree house to sleep, but Peter sat on top of it for a long while, thinking. Part of him wanted to go after Mary immediately, but his body was tired and sore. That would be nothing to him normally, but Tink was as exhausted as the Lost Boys, and he could use her help in the coming confrontation, at least to find Mary. So he sat, instead of rushing off. He sat, and he thought. He thought so hard that he forgot to be sleepy, and the sun rose with him still lost in thought on his perch.

*

Mary woke that evening with a painful headache, and knew at once that she was not in the tree house or any place familiar. Firstly, the tree house was never damp, and secondly, the Wendy-

bed was definitely not made of rock. The last thing she could dimly remember was the dragon, but the first thing she could see was Black Jack's face through the cage bars. She moved as far away from him to the back of the cave as she could.

"You frighten easily then," Jack said disdainfully. "I should have expected that out of one of Pan's girls."

"I have a *name*, you know," Mary replied, balling her hands into little fists.

"Oh, I know your name, Queen Marilu. I know quite a bit about you, and Pan, and his little Lost Boys." Jack kicked the bars of the cage and stood, pacing in his big black boots and with a swirl of his dark dirty coat. "Peter Pan, the boy who refused to grow up. The boy who *ran away* from home as a baby. Yes, Marilu, I know all about **Peter**."

It angered Mary more that the despicable bandit was using Peter's nickname for her than that she was quite captured, yet again, or even that the dragon had almost killed her.

"What could an evil man like you really know about someone like Peter? You're enemies. You're on different sides." She folded her arms on her chest and glared at the bandit.

"And you think Peter is so wonderful, don't you? Everyone does, I don't blame you for being like them." Jack stopped pacing and turned away from the cage. "Even mother and father always liked Peter better."

Mary's glare turned into a look of astonishment. Her jaw dropped, and her folded arms fell to the sides.

“But it won’t be long now before Pan comes to get you,” Jack said, and the bandit took a pistol from his belt. He aimed it at the entrance as he said, “And then I’ll finally have my revenge.” Then he turned dark eyes on Mary, expecting to see her shrink back, but she was no longer afraid, or even angry. “What’s gotten into you?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” Mary said.

“Aren’t you going to beg for your life? Beg for me not to kill Peter? Wendy would have. You’re just another Wendy in a long line of girls, you know. Another girl to play mother to a little boy who ran away from his own and is too scared to cry out for her.”

“Wendy wouldn’t have begged for anything,” Mary said, “And neither will I.”

“Then you really are just another stupid girl,” Black Jack said, tucking the pistol back into his belt and heading out of the cave.

*

That evening, once Tinkerbell had woken up and was dressed to go, Peter gathered the Lost Boys. He had an assignment for them. “Secure the tree house properly,” he said to them. “When I get back, we’re going to celebrate your bravery.”

Owl was the one to ask, “But Peter, where are *you* going?”

“What sort of a celebration can we have without the Queen?” Peter asked simply. He grabbed his sword from the collection at the foot of the Wendy-bed and flew out the window

with Tinkerbelle and the cheers of the Lost Boys following after him.

Staying behind made Mostly feel fairly uncomfortable. The Lost Boys had helped to save Mary from the dragon, what was different about rescuing her from Black Jack?

“We should go after Peter,” Mostly said to the Lost Boys as they prepared to go make ready for the celebration.

“Come off it, Mostly,” Boaster said. He was sore, and after the cuts and bruises taken from hounds and pirates, he was glad to be left out of the adventure, for once. “Peter’s more than a match for Black Jack. We’ll only get in the way, this time.”

“What if we can help?” Mostly replied. “Even if Peter doesn’t need us, Mary might.”

Notso stamped his foot on the little wooden planks of the floor. “Mary’s got *Peter*, Mostly,” Notso said. “What could she possibly need us for?”

Across the room, Giant set down his bag. The other Lost Boys turned to regard the discussion. “I don’t know,” Mostly admitted. “At least... not entirely. I mean I’m not sure, I just know we can help.”

“Maybe we *could*,” Puddle said. “But Peter told us to stay here.”

“He said that last time too,” Giant chimed in, “but we went anyway.”

“And we helped,” Owl added. “Peter was too busy fighting to worry about her.”

“We got her captured by Black Jack,” Jammer said, folding his arms angrily, “or don’t you remember that?”

Then it seemed that all the Lost Boys started talking at once. Everyone’s opinion came out and they all mixed like an angry cloud, filling the air in the tree house.

“Maybe if the rest of you hadn’t dropped her-”

“The hounds would’ve eaten us!”

“It’s partly our fault, maybe we should try-”

And then Notso bellowed, “Peter said to stay here!”

To which Jammer replied in a snap, “He’s having another adventure without us! Marilu or no Marilu, Peter’s going to defeat Black Jack today. If I can’t help, I at least want to watch!”

The Lost Boys fell silent. They all felt that comment in their pride, even Nosto and Boaster who thought they should follow Peter’s orders. They all dropped the equipment they were gathering and grabbed their swords, scrambling out of the tree house and down their trees.

*

It took Peter far less time than the Lost Boys to get to the lagoon. As his feet touched ground on the white sands of the beach, the mermaids hit him in the back of the head with fish. They were angry with Peter for their sloppy haircuts.

“Bother me later,” Peter said in a serious voice, drawing his sword and heading up the small sand dune to the mouth of the Bandit’s Cave.

The flash of the blade frightened the mermaids, and they all dove head over tail into the deeper water as Peter made his way towards the cave entrance.

The stone was a dark wet color, and it smelled of dogs and unwashed men. The moon rose behind Peter helpfully, and he skipped into the air again and flew slowly inside, making his way downwards to where he thought Black Jack might have taken her. A few seconds after he entered the cave, he did not have to guess, talking voices lead him downwards.

“Why did you bandage me?” Mary’s echoing voice asked.

“There’s no point in him fighting over you when you’re dead,” Black Jack’s very words, low and cold, seemed to sneer at her. The statements echoed on the damp cave walls. “Give me a bit more credit than Hook.”

“But if Peter’s your brother-”

“An unfortunate circumstance I intend to rectify.”

When Peter heard those words, he stopped short, landing on the wet stone floor of the cave with a trip. Hearing that his brother was alive and well and *in Neverland* brought back a rush of unpleasant memories that he thought he had forgotten.

The nursery.

The locked window.

His mother.

Peter's hand tightened on the hilt of his sword and he ground his teeth together. Black Jack... Jack Pan had taken so much from Peter, and for once it occurred to Peter. And once it had done that, he cared... and got very angry. On top of the home that this Jack had taken, now he had taken Peter's Mary as well.

Angrily, Peter lifted off the damp cave floor with an enraged crow, and flew more quickly down the twisting tunnels of the cave. Luckily for Peter, after so much time in Neverland, flying was more a reflex action than an act of concentration, fueled by the island rather than Peter's abundance of happy thoughts. He flew so quickly that he left even Tinkerbelle behind.

He found himself flying into quite a predicament. In his anger, Peter forgot that unlike Hook, who had a decided preoccupation with good form and fair play, Black Jack was only interested in killing him. And Black Jack was waiting for him.

The tall, black dressed man sat on a stool, leaning against the back of the cave with a pistol at the ready. The echo of Peter's crow had been enough to deafen the bandit, and he dropped the pistol on the floor of the cave near Mary's cage. He had boasted to the young girl how he had specially prepared the shot for Peter. She snatched the gun up quickly and backed into the cage.

Black Jack snarled at her, but quickly drew a sword as Peter burst into the cave, and the two brothers began a proper duel.

For a moment, I feel we should consider the mortal life of James "Jack" Panner, younger brother to Peter. As the younger brother of a disappeared and forgotten child, all of his parents' hopes and dreams for their first son were passed onto him. As a

young boy, as I have mentioned, James was picked on, a pattern that continued throughout his tenure all the way through preparatory school. He graduated and went on to study finance at a prestigious school and was awarded a most advantageous apprenticeship, fulfilling his mother's wish that he grow up to become a banker.

James had few dreams of his own, and what dreams he did have were curiously absent of Neverland, and fairly dull. The island eluded James as it eluded few other children, because it was the home of his forgotten brother. And because Neverland eluded him, James seemed very grown up as a young boy.

It was not until he had achieved his mother's dream that his true problem began to manifest. As he grew older, James began to get along with children more and more, and to act like them rather than the sophisticated banker he ought to be. But what pushed James over the edge, as it were, was something tragic that Peter never bothered to understand.

James and Peter's mother was a wonderful woman named Ellen Brown Panner. She had only ever good intentions, and hope. Even though her mind forgot about Peter, her heart simply refused to give him up, and she kept hoping he would return. As she saw James achieving what Peter had not, her dreams became plagued with her lost son. Her mind grew fevered with it, and her body sick. James and Peter's father, Arthur, removed the two of them to the country, and James came to visit often, more often when it became apparent that Ellen was unlikely to recover.

Sitting beside the failing woman's bedside, James was the last to speak to his mother, but she thought she was seeing Peter. Her last farewell was to a son she could not find for all her hope or good intentions. Confused, James went to his father. He

mentioned the name his mother had spoken, and just that mention was enough to jog the older man's memory.

“Peter... Our first son,” Arthur said. “He disappeared.”

Wondering at the coincidence of his lost brother's name, James became obsessed with Neverland and the stories of Peter Pan. And one day, when he was sitting alone in his darkened flat, he said to himself that he had no idea who James Panner was, or what it was that he should really like to be doing. He blamed Peter for stealing Neverland from his childhood, and vowed to steal Neverland **back**. In the darkness, he walked to the front door of his flat, tugged of his tie, and wandered away from the life of James Panner.

Somewhere in his walking, he decided this was who Jack was, instead. And somehow, a beach he was wandering on one day just turned out to be the white sand of the same color of Neverland's. And he thought if he looked just right and believed really hard, he could see an old Spanish galleon with cannons firing, and a small speck of something flitting around it.

He thought himself crazy, and turned around to head back towards the nearby town, but a mountain was looming where the town had been. A mountain surrounded by a very curious wooded area.

And then he knew he had found Neverland.

Jack quickly forgot most everything about James, except that he hated Peter Pan very much. And that brings us back to the battle.

Over in her cage, Mary clutched the pistol to her chest and watched the brothers battle fiercely. Tinkerbelle caught up with

Peter, finally, and flew at once over to check on Mary in the cage. At that same moment, Peter had Jack cornered. Without his pistol, Jack was just another adult in Neverland. "And that," Peter said haughtily, lifting his sword under Jack's chin menacingly, "is for everything you've taken away from me!"

Angrily, Black Jack's sword made a mighty swing that he did not know he was capable of, and Peter's sword was knocked to the side by his superior strength. "What about what you've taken from me?" Jack hollered. "What about NEVERLAND!" his holler turned into a roar.

"What about MOTHER?" Peter bellowed back.

As the accusations flew back and forth, so did the two brothers' swords. At Mary's quiet urging, Tinkerbelle tried everything she could think of on the lock, but nothing the faerie could do worked on unlocking it. From her watchful place in the cage, Mary watched sparks fly from the clashing swords, and finally she decided she'd had quite enough of this.

"Stand back, Tink," she warned. Lifting the pistol, she aimed very carefully with both hands and fired the gun at the lock on the door of the cage.

Smoke and fire erupted from the gun, and it grew hot. Mary dropped it, looking up at where she had fired the shot, and there was a hole in the door where the lock panel had been before. She scrambled to her feet and pushed the cage door open.

The two dueling brothers barely noticed Mary exiting the cage, and the noise of the gunshot had not been quite loud enough to break through the echo of their shouting. She decided it was better to let the two of them at their game alone, and, at Tinkerbelle's urging, flew up out of the cave towards the beach.

Up she flew through the corridors of damp stone, with water dripping around her and spider's webs hiding just on the edge of her view, twinkling at her in the glow cast by Tinkerbelle, who flew at her side as an escort. The two girls flew upwards until the dark stone walls of the caves gave way to the dark of the night sky sprinkled with stars. They again ran into arguing boys, only this time it was the Lost Boys, and they were arguing over who should go down after Jammer, who had crept in to see the fight.

"You go!"

"No you!"

"I'm not going down there!"

"Well neither am I!"

"You couldn't make me go – oh, hi Marilu – down that tunnel or–"

"Marilu!" Mostly shouted, interrupting Owl who was arguing loudest at that moment. The other boys all fell silent, and happy cheers rose from them. They crowded around her, glad to find her alive and safe, and she let them for a moment as she looked back at the cave. Tinkerbelle landed in her dark hair and jingled reassurances at the boys.

Then she cleared her throat and announced loudly, "We're going home."

"But what about Jammer?" Brother asked.

"What about Peter and Black Jack's fight to the death?" Notso asked.

“Well none of you are Peter or Jammer *or* Black Jack, and I’m sure you’ve got better things to do in the middle of the night than this!” Mary said in a loud angry voice. Bother the duel, bother the cave, she thought. She was tired.

“You’re just a stupid *girl!*” Notso shouted back at her. “What do you know about adventuring? We’re having to rescue you all the time.”

Mary shut her mouth on whatever comment she had for a long moment. So long that Notso’s courage was bolstered enough to taunt her, “Go on home, Marilu! Who needs a girl like you?”

Owl repeated it, and then the two boys started chanting, “Go home Marilu, who needs a girl like you?” Even Brother joined the two of them, jeering at her.

Anger welled up in Mary’s heart and she shoved Notso to the ground roughly. “At least *I* can fly!” she screamed.

The Lost Boys fell silent at that. Not a one of them could. Not even Notso, but he got to his feet and tried to shove Mary to the ground. He failed. She just hovered a few inches off the ground, and then she angrily punched Notso in the nose. She did not take this sort of nonsense from Peter, and she certainly was not going to take it from him.

“Home!” Mary ordered, planting her feet on the beach and folding her arms. The look on her face brooked no refusal.

Cowed, the Lost Boys did as they were told, heading back to the tree house in a single file line, heads hung low and with their tails between their legs. All except Notso, who stayed to wait for Jammer.

As the rest of the children headed into the junglewood, Mary smiled gratefully at Tinkerbelle. The faerie, in turn, jingled at her child. "Thank you for leading me out, Tink," she said.

Mary's eyes turned back to the beach. Tinkerbelle jingled a question. Mary nodded. "Keep an eye on him, will you?" she asked the faerie.

To this, Tink saluted, clicking her shining heels together. Happy to comply, she zipped back towards the cave, a golden streak moving opposite the crowd of Lost Boys with their flying guide.

Fifteen: The Storm and the Cave

Inside the cave, Jammer crept down quietly towards the sound of the fighting, unaware of what was happening between Black Jack and Peter. Deep within the cave, down the dark damp twisting passageways of stone, by the light of the old cracked oil lamps that the bandits had stolen from the *Jolly Roger*, the two brothers fought.

Peter, though he had not forgotten how to fly, in the heat of the battle simply did not. His bare feet found easy purchase on the damp stones. Black Jack's boots began to slip as the fighting continued.

Neverland watched the two brothers, through the eyes of the mice and the rats in the cave, and the reflections of them in the little pools of collected water. The amazing thing to watch, for

the animals at least, was that Black Jack actually appeared to be shrinking.

His actions, as he scrambled about in boots that suddenly seemed too big for him, fighting Peter wildly, were very much not those of an adult. And so Neverland simply adjusted to compensate for that, and because James had always believed so faithfully in Neverland, it went right ahead and adjusted him too.

Outside, dark clouds gathered on the distant horizon, and rain thick as a white sheet began falling over the Neversea. Notso watched as the falling water moved like a wall racing across the sea, straight for shore. It was upon him before he could blink an eye, and he was soaked.

*

In the junglewood, Mary and the other Lost Boys ducked for cover as swift winds began to shake the branches of the trees into cracking whips overhead. Thick lightning split the sky. When the rain swept over them, the children huddled close together. Mary gathered the boys close and they all ducked their heads as ice pellets began to fall, and then she knew that they simply could not hide like that forever. She got to her feet and marshaled them all towards the rocky hills at the base of the Nevermountain where surely, she thought, they would find a cave.

*

Notso thought for a moment, as the water drenched him, about running after the others, but once the ice started to pelt him, he hurried into the Bandits' Cave after Jammer. After all, he thought to himself, there was just the one bandit now, and no hounds. And Black Jack was fighting Peter. The rain followed him to the mouth of the cave, and tried to snatch at his heels. When it

could not catch him, the rainwater that was flattening the sand rushed in after Notso as he headed down the caves.

The slide of rainwater was a stream, and then a river as the water fell outside. A rush of it splashed against Jammer, pushing him forward, and then Notso slid into him on the slick decline shortly afterwards. The noise of the swordfight seemed quiet compared to the sound of the two splashing through what water had collected in the cave around the dueling brothers, so that all Jammer could hear was the noise of water.

That was the problem with fighting in a sea cave when it decided to rain, or if the tide was high and the waves were choppy. Peter finally resorted to flying as the water reached his knees, but Jack, who was growing smaller and turning younger by the minute, had a much harder time of it.

Up the tunnels a bit, Jammer and Notso were both surprised to run into one another, and let out a shout.

“You!” Jammer said when he recovered from his shout.

“Yeah, me!” Notso replied just as loudly.

“What happened?” Jammer asked.

“Marilu came out and took the other Lost Boys back to the tree house. So when it started to rain I decided to come down and join you.”

“I meant what happened to your nose?” Jammer asked.

Notso turned red at that question. “Marilu and I had a fight,” he said quickly, and changed the subject. “Why aren’t you farther down?”

Jammer turned a little red in reply. "I was working on it!" he said in an embarrassed voice. "They were shouting so much... it was hard to hear what direction to go in."

A tinkling noise from overhead made both boys scream again. Then they looked up. "Tinkerbelle!"

"Where have you been, Tink?" Jammer asked.

It was really sort of a silly question to ask, because neither Jammer nor Notso could understand a word of what she said. But what Tinkerbelle said when she replied was this. "*Silly boy. I've been with Mary.*"

To which the boys nodded sagely, as though they grasped her meaning, but really they understood nothing.

Tinkerbelle rolled her eyes and turned around, flying back down to the cave to check on Peter.

*

The dueling cave was filling with water, nearly a quarter of the way, and getting higher. If Black Jack had stayed an adult like most men in Neverland, the water would only have reached his waist, but since he had been changing, the water was nearing his chest. His black clothes, once fitted to his adult body, hung loose and filled with water. He swung his sword with all the childish anger he had for Peter, but he splashed more than he slashed, and his baggy, water logged clothing weighed him down.

Finally, as the water rose, even Peter began to feel the effects of the rainwater that splashed down into the bottom caves.

His sword struck stone overhead just as Tinkerbelle flew up to him, ringing with chatter.

“The cave’s filling up!” Peter shouted, words echoing in the cave. The noise of the rushing water was loud and drowned out a lot of the boys’ racket.

“I’m not done with you yet, Pan!” Jack shouted stubbornly.

“Oh come fight on the beach then!” Peter called back, flying over towards the entrance.

Whatever response Jack had was lost to the water. The weight of his loose, wet black clothing had finally grown heavier than his childlike muscles could handle. His water darkened auburn hair bobbed above the surface for a moment before the weight of it all sucked him down into the deepening pool of rainwater. His arms flailed so his hands brushed the surface of the water just once before he went under.

Peter waited a moment, an annoyed look on his face, before he reluctantly crowed his success. It did not sit well with him, beating Black Jack like that, but he had beaten him, nonetheless. It felt like a hollow victory to him. And then just as quickly as he had his sour thought, he forgot about it. Tinkerbelle flew up to his ear and asked him what had happened to the other boy.

Having forgotten the quarrel along with his sour victory, Peter dove into the water after Jack, hooked his arms around his brother’s chest and dragged him out of the deepening pool of water.

Outside and above the cave, all over the island, the rain stopped falling in such heavy, angry torrents, and spattered and

swatted the island much more politely. This was fortunate, for Notso and Jammer had clawed and crawled their way back up the slick caves and had just made it out onto the sand as the rain calmed down. They collapsed, damp and heaving heavy breaths amidst the seaweed and tree leaves left behind by the anger of the storm. They heard trickling water from behind them, louder than the light rain that was falling, but after all the fury and commotion of the raining that had just finished, they ignored it.

Or at least they ignored it until another body was flopped down onto the sand beside them and started coughing up rainwater rather violently.

“What’s going on h-” Notso began. He had not noticed Peter. Tinkerbelle jingled her amusement at the Lost Boys’ surprise.

But Jammer had. “Hi Peter!” Jammer said happily. “Who’s he?”

Peter shrugged at the simple question. “I rescued him from drowning,” he explained easily. He looked around and frowned, remembering that he had lost track of Mary again. “Where are Marilu and the other Lost Boys?” he asked.

“They went back to the tree house,” Jammer said, “before the storm.”

Notso poked at Jack with a bit of driftwood. “Who are you?” he asked the shrunken bandit in his sea of black clothing. Notso’s suspicious eyes looked at the torn black garments closely. Was that the same sway of cloth that had terrified his dreams? Was it the same cuff that allowed a hand to reach for a pistol to fire at them?

Jammer's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Probably another of Black Jack's captives, like Mostly," he said. "Did you kill Black Jack, Peter?"

"Of course," Peter said with a mysterious glint of mischief in his eye. He offered Jack a hand up, and a name. "Let's get Rags back to the tree house and have our celebration."

"Who's Rags?" the young Jack asked, confused. Peter grinned like a sated kitten and lifted off the beach, leading the way into the junglewood to scout out the others.

"You are, of course," Jammer said, getting up and dusting sand and seaweed from himself.

"It's a good name for him, Peter," Notso said, finding his sword and following their captain off the beach.

Epilogue

It so happened that Mary and the other Lost Boys were crawling their way out of the cave, digging themselves out of fallen branches and blown over brush that had covered the entrance, when Peter and Tinkerbelle flew by leading Jammer, Notso, and Rags.

“Peter!” Mary called out, leaving the Lost Boys behind and flying up to greet the captain.

Hearing her voice, a broad smile lit up Peter's face, and he turned towards her. He was glad to see Mary again, alive and well and still flying. In an impulsive move, he put his arms around her and gave her a hug.

Some of the younger Lost Boys, Giant included, made faces and gagging noises, but Mostly smacked them in the back of the head to shut them up. Mary blinked a moment before hugging him back, in the shy manner of the girl she had been before her adventures in Neverland, and then both children pulled back, laughing at the moment as it flickered past them like a faerie on the wind.

“Tell us about your battle with Black Jack, Peter!” Mostly called up.

“And who’s the new kid?” Owl asked, staring at Jack, or rather at Rags, in his oversized black clothing.

“I-I’m Rags,” Jack said, tugging at one torn, oversized sleeve. There were quite a lot of the Lost Boys, he saw, and he was just waiting for them to laugh at how ridiculous he looked.

“Hello Rags!” Mostly called, moving over to pat him on the back. The other Lost Boys followed. It had been quite similar for all of them. Peter had simply showed up with them, or the group had run across another child, and if the child was to be kept, Peter had pronounced that here was another Lost Boy, and given them a name.

Rags was surprised to be so easily welcomed, and he smiled.

“There’s time for all of this later!” Peter announced, his broad smile still in place. He had gotten all he wanted, it seemed. Marilu was safe, the Lost Boys had returned to Neverland, and he could still remember the last of his adventurous battles.

He had even fought a dragon!

And if Peter found the world that Mary and the new batch of Lost Boys came from to be strange and confusing, it could not be so important, because the children all found Neverland to be their home, just as Peter had. He had reason to be happy and content. He had a lot to be proud of.

At least for a little while.

And Neverland was vibrant and exciting again, filled with new places, and growing up new things – new animals to hunt, new captains to war with. Maybe even...

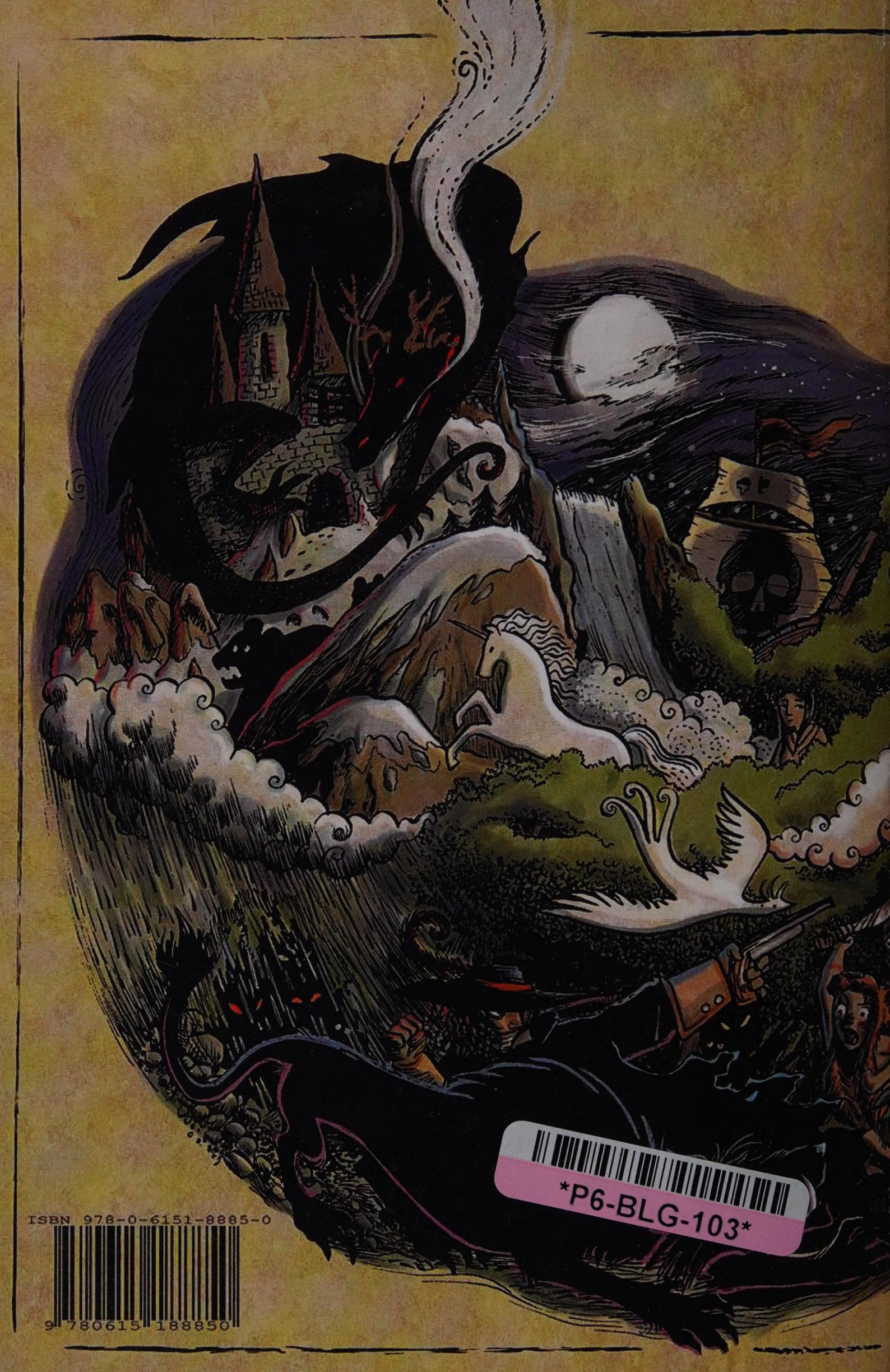
Well, that's another story.

One that happened after they returned to the Two-P-Tree and discovered the tree house had been destroyed by the storm, and that both the dragon and the old croc had lain eggs.

Another story indeed.



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